

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
GREIG BECK

MYSTERIOUS
ISLAND:
SANCTUARY



MYSTERIOUS ISLAND IV SANCTUARY

Greig Beck



SEVEREDPRESS

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*The more that stands in the way of two hearts that yearn for each other,
the hotter the flame of love grows – Old Viking proverb.*

PROLOGUE

Lemuria, the Mysterious Island hidden deep below the ice of Greenland.

Bragi shucked the animal carcass from his shoulder, wiped his streaming brow and relaxed his muscles. By Odin's beard, the thing was heavy.

He looked down at the carcass – it was an *eðlur*, a creature like a short-faced crocodile. The meat was white, dry as dust, and tasteless. And he had needed to trek for miles to find it. For some reason the lands surrounding the village were becoming empty of suitable animals. Even the tiny thumb-sized *meestalls* had vanished. It was like they had all fled – he cursed softly – or maybe some other clan had been hunting here.

He picked up a small stick and broke it in his large hands as his mind worked. He was clan Aegir, and ever since they had made the pact with the Fjall people and their accursed queen they had nothing but bad luck.

He threw the stick into the foliage and eased back on his elbows. He was part hidden from any large predators under the spreading branches of a huge tree, not that any of them had been seen for a while.

At twenty-five-years of age, Bragi was young, ambitious, and at nearly nine feet tall, already a formidable warrior. But his youth and ambition sometimes clouded his judgement and right now thoughts of challenging for the Aegir clan leadership danced across his mind. Again.

Bragi was there when Ogen was gifted the clan leadership by the Fjall queen, Yrsa. And that meant he did not ascend through bloodline or battle. And therefore was a pretender and not worthy.

He daydreamed about what he would do if, when, he became leader – he'd firstly make war on the Fjall. Slay their queen. And then take their land, treasure, and women. He could do it, he was sure.

He smiled. Then he could choose any woman he wanted. And why not, they would want to be with him; the young and handsome chieftain. His hot blood surged.

Bragi was pulled from his reverie by a scratching sound and looked over his left shoulder. Then the other. He couldn't pinpoint the noise, and tilted his head to concentrate.

He picked up his long spear – strange sounds, smells, or sights,

were nearly always unwelcome. Danger could follow. Deadly danger.

He tilted his head, listening. There was nothing for many moments and he was about to relax but then there it came again, and after another moment he stared at the ground. He slowly lowered his ear to the dirt – *there* – he could hear it now; it was coming from below him.

He tapped on the hard-packed ground with his knuckles. And the noise stopped.

He knocked again, harder. And then about ten feet from his left side, the earth started to lump like a dark blister.

“What is this?” He frowned at the growing lump.

The soil began to crumble outwards, and then, right in front of him, another of the bulges rose. Then another behind him.

Bragi stared open-mouthed as something the size of his fist emerged from the first extrusion. It was a shiny black, and it seemed to struggle to free itself for a moment and then lifted two, foot-long antenna and a pair of glossy black eyes followed.

A sliding sound behind him made him spin in time to see his fresh kill being dragged away. He roared and jumped to his feet.

But in those seconds, the ground around him erupted and dozens of the foot-long creatures emerged. And didn’t hesitate to head right for him.

Bragi remembered them now – the morwi from the pit – he thought they had been burned and what was left buried when their pit was filled in. He stamped on one, and his eight hundred-pound body should have crushed it flat. But though it pressed down to the ground, there was no satisfying crunch of bone or shell and spurt of blood and guts, and when he took his foot away, it immediately lifted and came at him again.

In seconds more they were on his legs. And then up to his thighs. He danced on the spot for a moment, madly swatting at the clinging bugs as their sharp legs dug in.

Then he just gave up and began to run. But that was when the stinging began.

His body went rod-straight, and his muscles and joints locked up from the venom, and Bragi fell like a tree trunk.

He was still alive, and felt them crawling all over him, but he was unable to move or utter a word. In seconds more he felt them begin to drag him towards an ever widening hole in the ground.

The animal carcass had already vanished inside, and Bragi followed. He wept as the light shut out, and the acidic stink in the crumbling tunnel made his eyes sting and his throat burn.

Above ground the hole was pulled closed. But below, Bragi was dragged into a larger chamber that was dimly lit by something like soft mosses that glowed a luminous green.

He was left and still unable to move a muscle. But something behind him shifted in the shadowy gloom, something far bigger than he was, that came closer and used long feelers to tap along his body.

He didn't know if he blacked out from fear or from the venom, but when he came awake there were several things like white beer jugs stuck to his body. And he saw inside them that something wriggled with an abominable life.

Bragi prayed. Prayed to die, and right now. Because he could guess what they were – eggs. And he knew that when they hatched whatever came out of them would be hungry.

CHAPTER 01

Today – the mainland, Norway.

It was hours before dawn, and Troy crawled on his belly to the top of the high jagged hilltop. He looked into the valley beyond and down to the small town nestled there. He had the field glasses to his eyes and knew the settlement was there, but it was invisible in the darkness, as there were no lights, no fires, and no sound. Just like all the others.

Wait, there was sound. Something moving.

He turned his head, listening. He could just detect a sliding noise, and maybe rubble being lifted or moved aside.

He pulled the sheet of old discolored canvas over himself, hunkered down, and continued to watch. He lay there still as stone for hours until there was a faint blush of light on the horizon and then the sun began to lift.

He blinked tired eyes and wriggled his fingers and toes. Though it was the end of autumn, the ground was still cold and permeated up into his belly and groin.

After another twenty minutes he could see the town clearly, and all its destruction. He put the glasses back to his eyes and scanned from one side to the other. After a few moments he found the movement and the source of the noise.

“So, there you are,” he whispered.

There were dragon spawn about the size of cattle, and still looking like little more than huge, spiked grubs burrowing through the debris.

The creatures had nubs that were the beginnings of front and back legs. Their squat bodies were still covered in spines and bristles and their long heads had two forward-facing yellow eyes, and already mouths filled with needles that he knew would grow into long daggers.

They were vulnerable at that age, but not to be underestimated as they were already fully capable of spitting their corrosive acid up to fifty feet. And that made them all the more deadly.

He saw several of them that had probably hatched here a few months back and were now nosing through the village’s remains either looking for bodies, or perhaps hoping to find some survivors huddling in basements.

What it told him was that though the adult dragons might have moved on, the young were still here, and soon would be big enough to roam the countryside, or perhaps soon, sprout wings and take to the

air.

Troy knew there was nothing here for him, not even an opportunity now to collect supplies for his coming voyage. He pulled back slowly and headed back to his camp on the coast.

It was strange. Lemuria, the mysterious island, the place he had once been marooned, and he feared as being the home of all manner of monsters, he now thought of something else entirely – a sanctuary – and his home.

It was midnight and Troy sailed the small boat up along the Norwegian coast. Over the last few weeks, he had felt the weather change – warmer air, and warmer water, meant the summer season was coming.

He had been moving more up the coast – just a mile at first – and then when he wasn't attacked, his next hop was five miles, and the next ten, and each time avoiding larger towns, as sometimes there were still the remnants of human beings remaining.

But they had retreated back into savagery, and were marauders, preying on anything and anyone they could find. Once he had even found evidence of cannibalism. The drekka weren't the only predators out there now.

The only respite was it seemed the drekka had moved on. There wasn't enough stock to feed them, and even the waterways were now empty of seals, whales, and anything over about a hundred pounds. Eventually he guessed the drekka too would resort to cannibalism when nothing else remained. And then that might be their end. But that could take centuries.

Troy always found that the ocean provided for him, and he had fashioned crab baskets and never failed to catch himself a meal.

Later that evening after a particularly long sail, he had pulled into the coastline, probably around the town of Tjøtta, and after a meal he would bunk down preparing to sleep the night onboard. He cursed again as he went into the cabin; he knew he needed a bigger boat as the sloop he was on was a good size for sailing, but his nearly eight foot tall frame did not fit inside the cabin, and he felt like the character from Gulliver's Travels trying to use everyday items for the little people.

He wondered if after a time, he might begin to shrink back to normal size as the effects of whatever it was on the island finally left his system. If it did, he hoped it would take years, as he wanted to keep his size and strength if, *when*, he got back to Lemuria. It was a place ruled by fang and claw, not to mention nine foot tall Vikings. It was also why he exercised every morning with large rocks as weights on the shoreline and practiced his swordsmanship on deck.

Troy rarely used lights or a fire, and mostly ate his food raw. And tonight he sat on deck, a blanket around huge shoulders and he stared off in the distance.

There were more islands out in the sea in this area, most uninhabited, but tonight he didn't see them. Instead his mind was a long way away.

The warming weather meant Odin's Gate would be revealed soon. He was ready to try and find it. This time he would be sailing without the dragon's all-seeing-eye, and he would be relying on nothing more than his experience, intuition, and luck. He knew it was there, and he'd never give up looking.

He closed his eyes and saw Yrsa's face – the large and luminous eyes, almost white hair twisted in braids down each side of her face and strewn with flowers, bones, and her small favorite talismans. He inhaled, almost smelling the berry scent she used to rub over herself to make herself more appealing to him.

He remembered her hand, then just her fingertips, as she tried to hang onto him as he sailed away in the balloon.

Come back to me, Troyson, she had whispered.

He sucked in a deep breath, opened his eyes, and had to blink them for a few seconds to clear their watering.

I did the right thing, he had to keep telling himself. He had made a promise to Anne, and he had kept it. Even though that promise had been the death of her, and the stranding of him.

Troy sat still as stone; his vision turned inwards. He remembered a quote from a book he read long ago: *Where we love is home, home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts.* Who said that, Oliver Wendell Holmes, or someone else? he wondered.

He thought it was funny how you read these old sayings and they meant nothing. Until one day they meant everything.

He sat lost in his own brooding thoughts for the next hour, feeling his eyes begin to droop. He was about to go below deck, when a small spark in the distance drew his attention – it was miles away – across the water. But it was no explosion or accidental blaze caused by an electrical fault. All those types of failures had run their course months and years ago.

This was a cooking fire. Or a signal fire.

Marauders? he wondered. Or good people? And if they were, they were fools, because the attention they would draw might be the end of them. He thought about it for several minutes.

"Nope." It was not his business anymore. He had his own destiny to follow.

He stood and crouched to enter the cabin but paused as curiosity made him look back over his shoulder.

Maybe tomorrow night having a quick look wouldn't hurt. After all, he missed conversation, and they might have something to trade. If they were good people.

That next night Troy saw the fire again just after the sun went down, and curiosity demanded he take a look. He took a small dinghy and silently rowed the several miles across the water, his huge body and powerful muscles never fatiguing in the long trip.

It was still early when he arrived and crept up the shoreline and over the hill to crouch in the darkness behind a stand of silver birch trees and settled down to watch.

He smiled dreamily as a community of people talked, laughed, ate, and some even danced to a boy playing guitar. There were children running about, squealing and playing. Young adults maybe in their twenties talking softly, a pair holding hands, and a larger group of adults conversing in earnest, perhaps planning for the next day's activities.

Once a man came and stood close to him, but not seeing him. He just stared out over the water for a while before heading back to the communal fire.

Troy left after the villagers had all turned in to sleep. But was back the next night and the night after that.

After he left this last time he decided he'd leave them to their ways as they seemed safe and at peace, and his path would lead somewhere far more dangerous.

CHAPTER 02

Unnamed island off the coast of Norway.

Anders Dahl drew in a breath and let it out slowly, watching the steam linger in the dead-still predawn air. It was still cool now but would warm as the sun rose.

The water before them was like dark, cold glass and half a mile out, the line of buoys were motionless meaning no breeze above water, and no current below. They held up the fishing nets, not to try and catch fish as the gaps were too large, but on top of each buoy was a bell – they were an early warning signal to alert them if a seagoing dragon tried to sneak up on them.

Thankfully, none of the monsters had been seen or heard of in months now. Gone for good, he hoped.

He looked over his shoulder at the small village. The houses were still beautifully painted in eclectic red, blue, and green, and the boats were still in the sheds. Once there was close to two hundred people living here and on the outskirts of Tjøtta. But now there was just twenty-five of them. The rest had left, or been frightened away, and had never come back.

From time to time, a few of them had sailed away to look for other peoples. But they too had not returned. He often wondered what happened to them. But deep down he didn't want to think too hard on it as he had a sick feeling in his gut about their fate.

Anders smiled ruefully as he stared back into the signal fire. He also wondered what would happen to them all. There were twelve adults, four of them over fifty, and thirteen children, ranging in ages from a toddler to twelve years of age.

What should he do? As the leader of the small group his choices were few – he could lead them to the mainland, and perhaps find a remaining drekka and a grisly death. Or do nothing and just sit and watch while the world ended.

Their fire didn't seem to find anyone, and he had seen no return fires burning on any horizon. Groups of people might be just over the hills or over the horizon, but he wouldn't chance a long voyage into the unknown. Others had tried, and where were they now?

He sighed, knowing he'd just do what he had been doing for the past few years – leave it and think about it tomorrow.

The band of marauders had spotted the light an hour ago.

There were thirteen of them in two old open fishing boats. They had fitted extra oarlocks so four men could row if need be, but for now just two men in each boat gently paddled on the calm water, trying not to make the faintest of splashes in the still night air.

They were adept hunters, and what they hunted these days was groups of people; for their women, goods, clothing, blankets, fuel, even for their treasure which was still traded. And also for one other commodity: for their meat.

Hagen Krillin, their raid leader, heard a small splash from the trailing boat and turned to glare in the darkness. The men in the rear boat couldn't have seen him, but a soft 'sorry' floated back across the water.

No one wanted to piss off the Hagen brothers, as they were brutal men. Karl held his position through the force of his fists rather than his intellect. But his brother, Jurgan, was a mix of brawn and brains and like Karl, had no qualms about killing their own people, as they'd done it before.

It was just before dawn when Hagen's band pulled in at a small inlet with a gravel-like beach. The men eased over the side and grabbed their weapons – a mix of long knives, cudgels, and spears – ammunition for guns was either rare, corroded, or exhausted in the short but futile war against the dragons.

Hagen's attack plan was the same one they'd always used – surround the camp, subdue any grown men, and anyone that fought back was to be put down immediately. In front of the others. Because displays of brutal violence in front of captives always worked as a deterrent for misbehaving.

Eventually, the men would be killed, the women and elder children would be taken. And the smaller children would be kept for their meat. There was no room for child rearing amongst the marauder group.

They had been looking for this group for many months, and just a few weeks back, they had captured two young people, a man and a woman, from this settlement that had sailed right toward them on the mainland and waved as if greeting long lost friends – in an hour they had been made to tell them everything about who they were, what they had, and how many of them there were. But they had refused to be specific about where they were from. Even after the woman had been tortured to death in front of the man. And then he didn't survive the next hour.

They had nearly given up. And then the fire had been spotted on the horizon.

Hagen had the small encampment surrounded quickly. He knew

there was a group of around twenty-five individuals, who were all living close by. By the nets and boats, they were a fishing village, and he doubted they'd have too many items of value or stored supplies.

It didn't matter. There was always something to take away, and as red meat was scarce, every side of 'long pork' taken was gratefully received by his group.

In minutes more they were ready, and all waited on Hagen's word. The man walked out into the center of the group of houses; he wore his tattered trench coat over a stained Iron Maiden t-shirt, greasy jeans, and army boots. Looped over his shoulder by a cord was a shotgun with two remaining shells loaded. He also carried a machete in his right hand, a range of knives, and a home-made pair of knuckle dusters in his pocket.

Hagen stood smiling and inhaled the smell of woodsmoke as he turned slowly. From a few of the brightly painted houses languid smoke lifted into the air. He smiled; this was the part he liked the best.

Hagen twirled a finger in the air. "Wake 'em up, boys."

The marauders streamed out of the line of forest and then broke apart to head to the houses. Doors were kicked in, shouts went up, firebrands were thrown in through doorways, and people were either herded out or were dragged out.

In five minutes most of the villagers were in a huddled group in the center of town. They were cold, confused, frightened, and all still in pajamas, long underwear, or trackpants.

Hagen nodded approvingly; some of the young women were lookers, and only a few of the men seemed anywhere near formidable. Plus the children would make good workers, or tasty food.

After many raids, Hagen knew now what worked best to garner the most obedience. In his hand he had a long machete-type blade.

"What is the meaning of this?" one older man demanded.

Hagen's smile widened. *And so it begins*, he thought.

"Are you the leader of this group?" Hagen asked politely.

"My name is Anders Dahl, and I am one of the village elders," the man replied. "There is no leader; decisions here are made by the group, for the group." He held up a hand. "We are a peaceful people. You're welcome to take what you need. We will not stand in your way."

"Bless you, sir." Hagen bowed briefly. "Step forward then, Mr. Dahl." Hagen waved him closer.

Anders spoke softly to a few of the adult men and women, offering words of comfort and then stepped out of the group and walked confidently toward him.

Hagen put the machete blade under his other arm, and held out his

hand, offering it up for a handshake.

Dahl kept coming, his expression stony. He had an *I-mean-business*, look in his eyes. When he was about four feet from Hagen he still hadn't raised his hand to take Hagen's outstretched one, and almost faster than the eye could follow, Hagen pulled his hand back to grab the knife handle sticking out from under his arm, and then swung it in a backhanded slice at the man's neck.

There was a sound like a butcher chopping lamb loin, and the blade entered and exited the neck, and only then did the man's head fling away, rolling in the air as it went.

Blood geysered straight up and then came the ghastly sight of the old man's corpse staggering around for a few seconds, before the knees crumbled.

The huddled group screamed. Some fainted, and the few men swore and looked like they wanted to charge at Hagen but were held back by their friends. Or common sense.

Hagen's men rolled with laughter as Anders' head lay upright on the ground, blood to the bottom lip, and the eyes wide and staring in disbelief.

"You see?" Hagen turned, arms wide. "You see what happens when I offer my hand in friendship, and it is rudely rejected?"

He flicked blood from his long blade, stepped over the body, and walked to the group, smiling like a wolf.

His team of marauders closed in.

Night fell, and Troy rowed across the water to the village. In his small dinghy he had some fresh caught crabs, crayfish, as well as some products he had found in a few of the rare unraided stores in his run up the coast.

For all he knew the villagers were better stocked than he was, but as a peace offering and sign of goodwill, he hoped it did the trick. Besides, when a giant, long-black-haired Viking walks into their home, it might settle them a little quicker if he was carrying gifts rather than weapons.

He slowed his rowing for a moment. For some reason their fire tonight was larger than normal, and he could see it blazing furiously through the trees. And already he could smell meat roasting.

He frowned, listening; there was laughing, shouting, and other sounds of a raucous party. But as he drew closer, they seemed to come from harsher throats than those he had witnessed in the communal village gatherings before.

Troy pulled harder on the oars, speeding up. He knew his sounds would not be heard over whatever festivities were underway over the hill.

He pulled into his normal cove, dragged the dinghy up, and this night hid it in some bushes. And that's when he saw the two large, unfamiliar boats several hundred yards down along the beach. They looked like old wooden open-topped fishing boats with double oarlocks.

Had they been night fishing? he wondered. Or was it something else, as the rough looking boats just didn't seem a fit for the pristine village community.

As he crept closer to the boats Troy regretted not bringing weapons. They were unguarded and he quickly sorted through them and found something useful – an old-style harpoon with metal, arrow-head tip. It would do.

He then moved quickly up the hill, sticking to the shadows beneath trees and behind rocks. In a few minutes he approached his usual watching place and got down to crawl.

He stopped dead, staring, as a shock ran through him – he had seen horrible things in his time on the hidden island of Lemuria. He had seen people eaten alive, melted like candle wax, and torn to shreds. But this still made him feel revulsion to his very core.

The people of the village had been made to sit in two groups – in the first was the women, and elder children. And then the other group off to the side had the older folk, the toddlers and babies, and all the men. All the men had their hands tied behind their backs, and heads bowed.

But what drew Troy's attention as his revulsion turned to white hot fury was what was on the fire, and what was the source of the cooking meat smells. It was a headless human being pierced by two stakes and held above the flames.

The stakes were used not as a form of Viking-style funeral, but so the headless body could be turned and evenly roasted. There was even one man basting it with some type of mixture and grinning broadly.

Troy tore his eyes away from the evil tableau and turned his attention to the people who had done this. He'd run across their type before and what they had left behind – bodies tied outside their homes, bound, tortured, and eventually, killed. These creatures, marauders, were human scum that the dragon plague had helped rise to the top of a filthy pond.

They hunted now – not for drekka, or for anything that offered hope to the human race, but instead, they hunted for people. The last good people.

This was how the world would really end for the human race. Not wiped out by a dragon plague, but instead slaughtered by an evil remnant of humanity.

Troy closed his eyes for a moment; he had heard that there were

large populations living in the deep tunnels beneath New York, in Moscow, Beijing, and beneath Sydney Harbor. But these small settlements mattered too. And that was why he refused to turn away.

He gripped the harpoon, counting off the invaders, picking his targets. He had been the war counsellor for the Fjall clan, and that was for good reason.

He had his plan set in his mind and began to work his way closer. Though the marauders had moved in to surround the cooking and the prisoners, a few had either remained or been positioned further out from the fire, and therefore in more shadow.

He crept up behind one of the outer men. As Troy approached he marveled at his own size now – the man must have been just under six feet and one-sixty to one-seventy pounds. But to Troy he barely came to his shoulder and Troy, at around four hundred pounds, outweighed him by more than two to one.

Troy crept closer and the man kept his rapt attention on the fire and the potential gruesome feast to come. Plus the festive sounds coming from the marauder's group covered his approach.

At the last moment Troy lunged, his massive body moving incredibly fast, and he grabbed the man by the neck and yanked him back into the darkness.

Troy squeezed the man's neck with one hand and brought his own face in real close. "Don't say a word."

The man's eyes were so wide they threatened to pop out of his head, and Troy knew why. Gripping him with a hand that wrapped entirely around his neck was a fearsome looking giant with long black hair, and clothing made from animal hides. He was lucky Troy didn't have any Viking war paint on his face or scrawled tattoos.

Troy turned the man around to face the fire, and brought his huge head down close to the man's ear.

"Tell me who your leader is."

The man hesitated. And then hissed, "I can't breathe."

Troy squeezed harder. "I will hurt you if you make me."

Troy brought the harpoon up beside his face. He dug the point into his cheek, only just breaking the skin.

The man grimaced, hissed between clamped teeth, as Troy applied more pressure. The harpoon tip sank in a fraction more.

"Okay, okay." His eyes slid to Troy as he couldn't move his head. "Who the fuck are you?"

"You'll find out after you answer my question," Troy replied.

The man looked back to the fire. "See the guy holding the machete? In the hunting vest. His name is Hagen. He's the raid boss."

"Hagen," Troy repeated, and then saw him. The man was around six-two and looked as mean as a junkyard dog. Even the other

marauders seemed to give him space.

“Good,” Troy said. And then, “You eat people?”

The man wriggled in his hand. “We have to. There’s no food.”

Troy grunted.

“You asked me who I am.” Troy increased the pressure on the man’s neck. “I’m a demon from a hidden island across the sea. And I’ve come to wipe you monsters from the face of the Earth.”

He squeezed even harder until the man’s tongue protruded from his mouth and kept squeezing until there was a crunching of firstly cartilage, and then bone. Troy let the man drop and his head flopped to the side as if the neck was boneless.

Troy felt no pity or remorse from his act. In his former life as a CIA agent, he had been called upon to take out threats. And if ever there was a threat to human life, this was it, and this animal was part of it.

He made his way along the line of trees, always staying in the shadows, working toward his next target.

He counted the ones he could see – around twenty. They were all men meaning that there must have been a camp somewhere where they kept their women and slaves. The full group back at their base might have been double or triple that size. For now he’d focus on this group.

The only one he could see with a gun was Hagen, and that was a good thing, as the rest just had knives, spears, and clubs. He wondered if he captured the man, would the others surrender?

By the way he barked orders, and the looks he got, the group probably wouldn’t care at all if he went down. He’d be a man who ruled through fear and force.

Troy approached another man standing at the outer rim, and quickly darted forward to grab him and put him down. He circled some more, holding his breath as he passed through the cooking smoke. Revoltingly, the smells made his stomach rumble.

In a few more minutes Troy had killed another four of the marauders, and now watched as the roasted corpse was hauled from the fire and laid onto a slab of wood that would serve as a carving table.

The huddled captives either sobbed, or covered their faces, or simply sat staring at the ground at the prospect of one of their own about to be eaten. And perhaps they knew this was the fate that was awaiting many of them.

Troy came in behind the first of the small houses, and found there a cannister half-filled with valuable gas. He was about to pass it by but then paused, and then went back to pick it up.

In seconds more he was behind the group of captives who were now guarded by just two men. Even they watched the fire and perhaps

waited their turn as the marauders lined up waiting for a portion of their grisly feast.

Troy knew there was no other way to pick them off, and so decided on a full frontal attack.

He steeled himself, and then sprinted forward, passing the captives and the two guards, raising the canister of gas high over his head, judging the angle, and then throwing it like a high speed bomb at the fire.

It was a direct hit: the canister exploded, and a wave of ignited fuel blew out of the fire and washed over most of the cannibal diners.

Men screamed and sprinted away like flaring comets into the darkness. Several rolled on the ground, trying to put themselves out, and some who missed the fuel wave spun one way, then the other, looking for the cause of the volcanic eruption. One of them was Hagen.

But Troy didn't stop as he wasn't finished. He remembered from his CIA mission days, that confusion amongst your adversaries was an opportunity to be taken.

Troy used his huge body to leap over the remnants of the fire and landed amongst the chaos and flames in the village center.

The men were startled by the giant and looked about to panic, but Hagen screamed to them, driving them forward, and perhaps they were more frightened of him than they were of Troy.

The men raised their clubs, knives, and spears, and charged at him. Troy launched his harpoon at them so hard, it hit the closest man dead center, and blew him ten feet backwards. Lying on the ground were many forgotten weapons, and he snatched up a long machete, and using his Viking battle experience, furiously slashed left and right, cleaving away arms, legs, and heads as he worked his way to their leader.

In seconds more, either the men were cut down, burned, or a few had fled screaming into the darkness. He promised himself he'd get them later.

He closed in on the man, but Hagen stood his ground, and grinned cruelly. And Troy remembered why. From under his arm he lifted the shotgun he had tethered there and aimed it at Troy.

He grinned. "Surrender, you giant ass..."

Troy never slowed but threw the machete with all his strength. It wasn't a perfect throw, but the two foot-long, heavy blade traveled at a blistering speed to the man, and hit him in the forehead, cutting away the top few inches of his skull from just above his eyebrows.

By the light of the fire he saw the remaining long, greasy hair, turn a glistening red and the exposed brain reflecting the flames.

Hagen's eyes went wide, and he reached up to touch the soft mass

where the top of his head and hair used to be. "What the fuck?" he screamed.

By then, Troy was on him, and ripped the gun from his hand. He lifted him by the shirt front.

"Burn in Hell." Troy carried the man to the fire and flung him into its hungry flames.

Hagen's screams were barely even noticeable above the wailing of the captives who seemed in panic at the sight of the blood-covered giant's rampage.

Troy grabbed up a knife and ran to the group of captives. All shrieked and all shied away from the bloody giant.

"*Friend*," he shouted and quickly cut some of the young men's bonds. He then handed one of the freed men the knife. "Free the rest, quickly. I need to catch the others before they escape and bring back others."

He sprinted off into the darkness, the way he had seen several of the stragglers flee. In moments he came across one of the men who had been burning who had died from his wounds. He charged off again and even though the moon had come from behind the clouds to shine a silvery light down on the landscape he couldn't hear or see them.

"Shit," he whispered.

Troy changed course and headed back to the beach where their boats were pulled up, moving quickly. But not quickly enough. As he arrived, he saw that already a hundred feet from the shoreline one of the marauders' boats was rowing hard, with both men on the oars.

He seethed, knowing he should have come to the beach first. But then turned to the other boat and began to push it into the water. He bet he could run them down.

Then he noticed the oars were gone and stopped. "You clever bastards."

He knew he could never catch them in his own small dinghy.

He stood watching them for a moment, and then put his hands up to cup his mouth.

"I'll find you," he shouted.

The men just rowed harder until they vanished in the darkness.

He walked slowly back up the hill and came over the rise. He saw that many in the group had armed themselves, with the weapons of the marauders. And they held them at the ready.

On the ground he saw a grenade and picked it up – the pin was intact, and he jammed it into a pouch pocket.

The villagers backed away when he approached, absolute fear in their eyes.

Troy stopped a dozen feet from them and held up his hands. "Be

calm. I am a friend.”

As he waited, none dropped their weapons and some even began to back up. Troy could understand what they were thinking – he was close to eight feet tall, hugely muscled and wearing something like Viking clothing. His hair was coal black, and long to his shoulders. At least he kept up his shaving, so he remained feeling slightly civilized.

He put his hands on his hips. “Do you have a person in charge?”

They just stared, but he saw some of their eyes go to the burning corpse.

“We used to,” an older woman said and motioned to the body. “That was Anders, Anders Dahl.” She lifted her chin. “Did you get them all?”

Troy shook his head. “No. Two got away.”

The woman sighed. “Then they’ll be back.”

He nodded. “Probably. Do you know where they came from? Or how many?” Troy asked.

The woman shook her head. “Somewhere on the mainland. And I’m not sure how many, but this was just a raiding party. We had heard stories of them. Their camp is run by two brutal brothers.” She half smiled. “And you just killed one of them.” Her eyes narrowed. “Who are you, and where did you come from?”

Troy wondered what he could tell her that might be believable. There wasn’t much. “A place a long way away. An island that’s... that’s different to here.”

“Are you all giants?” she asked.

“Yes, now, we are.” He half smiled. “Long story.”

“And what do they call you, friendly giant?” she asked.

“Troyson Strom. Troy.” He wiped his large hands on his leather breaches, and then stuck his hand out. “Nice to meet you.”

She gripped his hand, or at least part of it. “I am Agnetha Ostenson. Nice to meet you, Troyson. And thank you for saving us. For now.”

She turned to the group who were now all free, some rubbing wrists, some hugging and comforting each other, but all watching them, even the children.

“He’s a friend,” she said loudly.

Agnetha quickly introduced the group, and Troy nodded to each, knowing he’d never remember all their names. Most of the younger ones still looked petrified. Some of the older ones as well. The adults looked wary, but he guessed they were open to having a giant as a friend if he was on their team.

“Did you come here for food, or trade, Troyson? We don’t have much,” Agnetha asked. “And what now?”

“I originally came here for trade. I am trying to get home and needed some supplies. I was hoping for some dried meat, as my

voyage will take many days over the water.” He half smiled. “I brought you some fresh crabs.”

Agnetha nodded. “Thank you. But there are no sheep, no cattle, or pigs. Nothing survived the dragon plague.” She half smiled. “At least they seemed to have moved on; nothing for them to eat. We dared to hope we would be safe from now on. Seems there are other monsters to contend with.”

“There will always be men like Hagen,” Troy replied. “The world out there has slipped back into savagery.”

“*Hmm.*” She looked across at the fire burning down, exposing the now charred corpse of their once leader. “Then tonight we will eat crab and bury our dead.” She looked up. “And you can help us decide what to do, as the marauders will surely return with greater numbers, and we are unarmed. And I do not wish any more of our people to end up like Anders, God rest his soul.”

Troy nodded. “I’ll help you. And I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner.”

“Troyson...” She asked and he turned to her. “How many days is your voyage?”

He bobbed his head. “Maybe five days, over the open water, and then through the ice. Maybe a few more than that.” He shrugged. “That’s if I can find it again.”

“A risk for you.” Agnetha nodded. “And a greater risk for us if we stay here.” She lifted her chin. “But we also have boats.”

CHAPTER 03

Lemuria, the Mysterious Island hidden below the ice of Greenland.

The three huge warriors, Erik, Magnus, and Aksel held their spears up to keep the fifteen foot tall, 2000-pound theropod dinosaur at bay.

Each man was broad and close to nine feet tall, but they were easily outweighed by the fear-maddened beast. It was a mottled black and brown but had red, furious eyes and in its long boxy head, powerful jaws hung open displaying finger-length, conical teeth that looked wickedly sharp and meshed together like shears.

The huge men knew this type of creature was a feared and formidable predator and one they usually avoided. But game had become so scarce, they were forced to take it on for its meat as it would feed the entire clan for days.

They stood in a half ring around it noting the weapons in its arsenal – huge thumb and toe claws that could disembowel a man with a single swipe. Also there were powerful jaws, great speed, and most deadly of all, a hunter's brain.

The carnivore suddenly turned, whipping itself around and its long tail followed at lightning speed. It caught one of the warriors, Erik, across the face, and the man flew backwards, unconscious before he even hit the ground.

Three men might have been a match for the creature. Two, not so much.

The two remaining men, Magnus and Aksel, were forced to back up, but now the tables had been turned, and the huge carnivore eyed the unconscious man with a ravenous hunger. It was lean with its ribs showing, meaning it too found meat scarce and so would not leave without a meal.

It snapped its head forward, catching the tip of one of the remaining men's spears in its jaws. The teeth snapped together, and the spear end was removed to be spat to the side.

"Magnus, spear it," Aksel said.

Magnus had the remaining spear, while Aksel pulled his axe from over his shoulder. The man knew that if it came to close quarters fighting with the beast, even if he managed to strike it, the jaws would have him, and he'd never survive the deep wounds.

Magnus turned, gave an almighty war cry and threw his spear. It was only a short distance, and it caught the biped creature in the

upper chest, but the tough hide and dense muscle bunching stopped it from penetrating to any vital organs. It was a painful blow, but not a fatal or even a debilitating one.

The dinosaur reeled back and set to using its jaws to pull the spear free. It was the only opportunity the men would have – not to continue the fight but escape with their lives.

Magnus and Aksel snatched up the unconscious Erik and began to run back along the game trail. But it was only seconds more before they heard the thumping sound of pursuit.

Magnus cursed. He knew now that burdened with the unconscious man they could never outrun the predator. Or at least not all three of them.

He grimaced. He had a new wife and a baby at home, and he wanted to be with them one last time. But he knew it would not be.

He knew he would see them again. Just not in this realm.

As they ran he reached across and took the axe from where Aksel had it slung on his back, and stopped. He pulled his own into his other hand.

Aksel turned. “What...?”

Magnus swung the axes in an arc and then banged them together. He planted his legs and faced the trail. “Get him back to the village, brother.” He grinned. “I’ll see you in Valhalla.”

“No, I’ll... let me,” Aksel said.

“Go!” Magnus roared, and then held the axes wide, both of them ready to bite deep.

The Viking knew two axes would not save him, but the fight and the monster’s feasting would give his brother warriors the time they needed to get to safety.

The sounds of pursuit were loud now – foliage was smashed aside and the thump of two large, clawed feet filled his world.

He gritted his teeth, calming himself. The monster appeared and stopped dead at the sight of the single creature waiting for it.

Magnus roared his futile challenge. He was a brave warrior but couldn’t help feeling his knees tremble just a little.

“Farewell, beautiful Hailee,” he hissed between his teeth. “Make little Orak a strong warrior.”

He heard the sound of footsteps. But these came from behind him.

“Down!” Yrsa yelled as she sprinted down the track followed by Aksel and another warrior.

Magnus turned, as the creature was confused by the appearance of the new biped with the long flowing white hair. But only momentarily. It began its charge.

Yrsa picked up speed toward the charging beast, counting her steps and the distance. In her hand was a two-foot long blade – short for

her, but needle sharp.

When she and the beast were just ten feet apart, and both travelling at speed, the therapod lowered its head and opened its huge jaws to take her.

But Yrsa knew a trick learned from Troyson Strom and jinked to the left side. The creature's head followed, expecting to snap her up. But then she rapidly stepped back the other way. Then leapt at the thing's head.

Troyson had said to her once that the eyes were the windows to the soul, which she had not understood. But he also then said, they were also the windows to the brain, which she did.

Her arm was drawn back as she flew through the air, and then when just a few feet away from its head, she struck out, and thrust the blade into one of the monster's furious red eyes, embedding the blade deep.

She came down past the creature, rolled and came upright, spinning quickly to watch.

The blade was sunk nearly to the hilt, and the huge creature staggered. Made one feeble attempt to wipe the blade from its head, but then fell like a tree, raising dust and fallen leaves into the air.

Magnus stood with mouth open, and then threw his head back and held his arms wide, still holding the axes. "*Ooo-diiin!*" His shout going on for several long seconds as the other warriors appeared.

He went to one knee, head bowed. "Thank you, my queen."

She smiled down at the young warrior. "I'm not ready to lose you just yet, brave Magnus." She walked to where Aksel had laid the unconscious body of Erik.

There was a huge welt and a lump could just be made out growing under his beard. "He'll live," she said and walked to the beast to pull out her blade.

There was a lot of good meat, and game had been scarce. "Bring it," she said, and then turned to her warriors. "I think that brother Erik will be serving the bier this evening."

With a cheer the men set to tying ropes around the therapod carcass and dragging it back to the village.

"It has been an honor, my queen." Aksel bowed and then looked to her. He stood. He was tall at nine feet, and his eyes bored into her.

Yrsa looked away but could feel the man's gaze still scalding her from behind.

Later that same day, Yrsa took her infant son, Stromson, to the cave of the chieftains. It was where all the clan kings and queens who had passed before them were interred.

At the cave mouth there grew a tiny, speckled mushroom. It was

the *Amanita pantherine*, known in the modern world as the panther cap. It contained a strong psychoactive called *muscimol* and induced a feeling of dispensation from the body. But it also allowed the living to converse with the dead.

Yrsa broke one off and put it in her mouth, chewing the rubbery flesh and ignoring its acidic bite. She swallowed it and lifted her burning torch to walk the tiny boy further into the cave's depths where the carvings honoring Skarde were.

When alive, Skarde never had the opportunity to meet Stromson. But he had met him from his place in Odin's Great Hall when Yrsa had called to him.

She enjoyed showing off her son, and as he was now two years old he was already growing tall and strong.

She stood in front of the carved image of the former chieftain, and placed her burning torch into a slot in the wall.

"Mighty Skarde, Father, I come to talk with you."

The air shimmered for a moment, and then the carved image seemed to blur and swim for a few seconds, before it came to life.

"Daughter, Chieftain of the Fjall, greetings again."

She smiled at seeing him. He wasn't the frail old man with the eating sickness that was devouring him from the inside in the days before he had been killed. Now, he was young, powerful, and clear of eye.

"The little warrior grows," he said, looking down at the boy.

"He grows more like his father every day, and with hair like the darkest night." She smiled at the boy.

"His missing father," Skarde said dismissively.

He waved a hand and a dagger clattered to the floor at Stromson's feet. The boy picked it up. He made burbling noises as he slashed it about. Yrsa smiled as he accidentally cut his own arm, and spun to her, his brow creased, as though asking was he hurt and should he cry.

"Yes, it hurts. But you'll heal." She nodded "You must learn to be careful. If you can do that, you can keep it."

The boy went back to jabbing it into the cave floor and walls. Skarde just laughed dryly.

The old man then sighed and looked to her. "He needs a father."

"He has a father," Yrsa responded quickly.

Skarde shook his head. "Not here he doesn't." His eyes blazed and the ghostly face seemed to loom toward her. "Danger is coming. It comes from beneath your feet. I've seen it."

"No one would dare make war on the Fjall, we are the strongest," she replied defiantly.

"Something comes that fears not your weapons, or your numbers. It is a black sea that will wash you away." He seemed to sigh. "Yrsa,

there are many young warriors that would make for a suitable mate and would challenge for you. You just need to say the farewell words over Troyson Strom."

She looked up sharply. "I will never say the death words as he is *not* dead. I would know it."

Skarde's image seemed to blur as he eased back into a fog. "It is the clan law. If a warrior is gone two years, they are pronounced departed. Then you are free to be married. You do not have a choice."

"I'm not..." She shook her head. "I need more time." She put her fist against her chest. "He is still in here. He owns this heart."

Skarde's eyes were sad. "No, he does not own it, but has taken it prisoner." He smiled sadly. "Troyson is not coming back."

"I need more time. Give me a year," she pleaded.

"You have already had two." Skarde stared for a long moment. "I see inside the minds of the clan council. You will have six months."

She lowered her head but eventually nodded. "I know he's still out there." She looked up. "I know it."

"Perhaps," Skarde replied. "But remember, he left with his woman. She is probably his wife now and you are forgotten."

"Never." She flared. "And the woman was not his wife. He loved *me*." She pointed at her tiny son. "He gave me Stromson."

"Did he tell you he loved you? Did he say the words?" Skarde said softly.

"He want..." Yrsa's mouth snapped shut and her eyes blazed. After a moment she snatched up the boy and ran from the cave.

Back in her chieftain's hut, Yrsa carefully scrawled the powerful mystic runes on both her palms. When done she checked them, and then said a silent prayer to Odin with her eyes pressed shut.

She then stepped out onto her front porch that was high on the hill and looked down over the village.

Yrsa faced the direction Troy had drifted away in his balloon and held both her arms up, palms facing to the direction he went.

She stood there for ages, her eyes closed, just showing the words: *Come Home*, written on both her hands.

CHAPTER 04

Unnamed island off the coast of Norway.

"You cannot come with me," Troy said to the old woman. "Where I came from is a place so dangerous, none of you would survive. Even with my protection you would not last more than a few months."

Agnetha scoffed. "And when the marauders return. With a bigger force, with weapons, and looking for vengeance blood; how long do you think we'll last here?" She pointed to the grave where Anders was buried. "We'll be food or slaves."

Troy shook his head. "No."

"Is that the life you think is preferable for us?" She frowned up at him.

"I shouldn't have come." Troy began to turn away.

"No, you shouldn't. But you did. And you fought to save us, so I know in your heart you are a good man," Agnetha replied. "And sometimes being good is hard."

Troy half turned back. "I'm not a good man. I've done things in my life. Bad things."

"As we all have. Our world has changed," Agnetha replied. She held an arm out towards the young ones. "At least get them to safety."

Troy had been keeping details of the mysterious island, Lemuria, back from them, but knew he had to open her eyes.

"Agnetha." He crouched to one knee so he could look directly into her face. "Even if you could survive the voyage through the frozen sea, there are monsters there. I've seen strong men devoured alive. Everyone I went there with was killed, horribly." He straightened. "I don't want to see that happen to you."

"Troyson, those monsters are here, now," Agnetha pressed. "So what is the difference?"

"Dragons aren't the only monsters that live there." He shared a lopsided smile. "There are things just as bad, or worse."

"Well then." She folded her arms. "You might as well kill us all. Right now. Because if those two men that got away reach their home and tell their leader that you killed his brother, then they will be back looking for bloody murder."

"Then you should move," Troy said. "You should find a place further up or down the coast. I can at least help with that."

"And how long can we keep doing that?" Agnetha turned to nod towards two children: a boy around eight and a girl maybe twelve,

staring at him.

The boy looked excited and awestruck, but the girl looked haunted, standing stock-still and watching him in a faded and oversized, green AC/DC t-shirt.

“That’s Ollie and Anna Winterson, cousin orphans, like most of the children you see here. They lost everything, and all they have left is their lives. Anna hasn’t spoken a word since she saw her parents be burned alive by a dragon.”

Troy looked at them, and the kids stared back at him. The boy waved, and Troy resisted the urge to return the gesture.

He looked away. “Sorry, but let me be brutally honest, Agnetha. If they came with me I would probably watch them die. If they stay here...”

“Then they die, but you do not have to watch,” the old woman smiled sadly. “Okay, Troyson. Thank you for listening to me.” She turned away.

Troy watched her join her group and many gathered round her as she reported back. He was doing the right thing, he convinced himself. They would never survive with him.

He headed back to his boat for the crabs, and as he went he passed by the fresh grave of the man who had been beheaded and roasted. He knew the old woman spoke the truth; if the marauders ever caught them again, none would survive. And many would be tortured before death. As punishment for what he did.

He kept his head down. He had his own problems, and taking in a lot of strays wasn’t going to be one of them.

CHAPTER 05

The Cobble Hill Tunnels, New York.

Marty Stillson and Frank Grimes walked quickly along the tracks. They held up lanterns with small candles in each. Flashlight batteries were too valuable and scarce to use, and even candles needed to be rationed. The colony were making new ones, but they were becoming poor quality, burned quickly and gave off a lot of greasy smoke.

Marty and Frank were one of the dozens of the gathering teams that headed out from the main encampment at the deepest part of the old train tunnels, and searched the endless miles of side tunnels, pipes, and tributaries, for goods that could be used by the hundreds of people who made up their underground colony.

They often found abandoned train supply depots, or even vacated encampments where the old mole people used to live that had still unopened tins of food.

The tunnel they were in right now was only about fifteen feet around – far too small for a dragon to use, unless it was a young one, which were just as dangerous. But at least they couldn't fly.

Often when exploring they came to breaks in the roof where the sunshine came through. It hurt their eyes at first, but if it was safe, they would stand with faces upturned and luxuriate in its clean warmth. Sometimes they climbed up to check where they were, remembering what their lives were like just a few years ago before the dragon horde arrived; the great scaled and horned beasts that literally devoured their world and scattered the people to the winds.

Marty and Frank carried collection sacks, water bottles, and one more thing – explosives. The rule for all the explorers was if they encountered a dragon, to blow the tunnel they were in. otherwise, the monster might try and burrow down to follow them back for a feast of free meat.

"Sunlight up ahead," Marty said.

"I can smell it." Frank grinned.

"Bullshit." Marty grinned back. "Sunshine don't smell like anything."

"Sure it does. It smells like grass, and clean earth, and flowers." Frank turned. "And singing, and laughing, and... freedom."

"Yeah, I can dig you." He nodded. "But most of those things aren't smells; they're memories, man. Just beautiful memories."

Frank turned. "Do you think, *ah*, we'll ever have them again?"

“Maybe. Some of the other groups have been saying there are no more dragons. All died out from hunger.” Marty slapped his friend on the shoulder raising a small cloud of dust. “Here’s hoping.”

The pair headed toward the faint glow of light and Marty held up the lantern to guide them through some of the darker areas of rubble and debris.

As the pair rounded some twisted wire, with the increased lighting they saw that the roof had fully collapsed.

“Rock fall,” Marty said.

Frank nodded. “Maybe when they were trying to bomb the big fuckers.”

“Nah, this is more recent,” Marty observed.

He went to move on but felt something digging into his leg and looked down expecting to see he had been snagged by some twisted wire or jagged rock.

But when he saw what it was it made the hair on his neck rise.

“Oh god no.” His eyes went wide.

Attached to his leg was a grub-like thing about a foot in length that was covered in bristles and spines. At its front were two yellow staring eyes.

Only then did he see the things surrounding them that looked like broken pottery – dragon eggs.

“*Spitters!*” Marty screamed.

“Fuck!” Frank yelled and went to step closer to help his friend.

But from the rubble more of them appeared and headed straight for the men, moving in a peristaltic motion as they still hadn’t formed legs yet.

Marty banged a fist down on the thing to try and dislodge it, but it held tight. And in return, it shot a stream of yellowish bile onto his other leg. Immediately the material began to burn. And then his flesh followed.

The man screamed, gripped his steaming leg and turned to his friend. “Run, don’t let them follow you.”

“I, but...” Frank danced from foot to foot.

But Marty’s scream turned to a howl of agony as his left leg dissolved at the knee and his foot fell away. As he went to the ground he ripped off his backpack and pulled out the large bomb and timer.

He looked to his friend, his face a sweat-slicked rictus of pain, and he hissed through clamped teeth, “Ru-uuunnn.”

Frank’s muscles unlocked and he turned to sprint away.

He got no more than a hundred feet before the huge orange blast filled the tunnel with heat, light, and a percussive wave that kicked him forward twenty feet to roll along the tunnel floor.

From behind him came a billowing dust cloud and the thud of

heavy rock falling that went on for several seconds.

Frank sat up in darkness as his candle had gone out. With fumbling hands he felt for it and found it thankfully undamaged and still hanging from his shoulder. He relit it but the cloud made it impossible to see. He wanted to keep running then, but he had to stay his ground and see the result.

Frank coughed as the choking dust settled around him. More rubble fell, but it was just smaller rocks within the cloud.

Or was it something moving? he wondered.

He held the lantern up higher.

More sounds in the darkness, and the dust still shrouded everything.

Frank shucked off his backpack, opened it. He then placed his fingers on his own bomb's initiator. He didn't want to die. But he knew that the rule for the foragers was to never allow the dragons to find or follow them. To preserve the colony and all its children, they must be prepared to sacrifice themselves – Marty knew he was as good as dead and blew himself up to kill the spitters. But did he get them all?

"Please, please, please," he whispered.

The cloud settled a little more and he noticed that the sunshine they thought they could detect had been blotted out. He finally got to his feet and held his lantern out. The cloud settled enough for him to see now.

Frank exhaled and lowered his arm. The tunnel had collapsed. There was nothing moving.

Thank god, he whispered.

Frank turned away to head home. Today, he'd return empty handed, and without his friend. But what he learned was the dragons were still out there. Still waiting for them. And still breeding.

CHAPTER 06

Troy had left the crabs for the villagers and sat away from the fire. It was a somber event and people quickly turned in. Most of the villagers had avoided him and he guessed his huge size and fearsome appearance was just too much for them.

He decided he'd wait a little longer until they all began to sleep then he'd quietly slip away.

He hated himself for doing it but had offered to help them find another place. Deep inside him, he knew that would give them little comfort as if not in a week, or a month, or years, their settlement would be found by the marauders, and then?

And then everyone would die. Badly. He sighed.

"Is everyone a giant where you came from?"

Troy jumped a little as the voice was right behind him, and he turned to see the orphan boy, Ollie, standing there.

The kid launched into a million questions about where he came from, his huge size, how much he ate, where did he even get shoes to fit him, and so on.

"Why aren't you in bed?" Troy asked.

"I'm not tired, so..." He shrugged. "...so, is everyone a giant where you came from?"

"I guess they are now," Troy replied.

"I wish I was a giant," Ollie said. "I'd go and find my dad."

Troy turned to the kid as he looked off into the distance.

"He went to find some supplies with my uncle on the mainland." Ollie's mouth turned down. "He hasn't come back yet. Maybe he got lost." He wandered closer. "When I'm older I'll go looking for him." He looked up. "Have you seen him... out there? He looks a bit like me. Except taller. And has a beard."

"No." Troy said.

He could guess what happened to Ollie's father, and he doubted he'd ever be back.

Troy sat in silence, as the boy kicked at something with the toe of one of his rapidly falling apart shoes. They looked like old leather school shoes that had one toe repaired with electrical tape, and the others was scuffed to a dirty white abrasion. Neither had laces.

Ollie spoke without looking up. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

Troy exhaled through his nose. "Yes."

"Can you..." Ollie continued to look down. "I mean, I know you

don't want to take us with you, but..." He looked up. "Can you take my cousin, Anna. She's just a kid and a good girl and won't eat much." He looked up. "She's a bit messed up in her head, since..." He looked away.

Troy slumped forward. *Oh fuck*, he thought.

"She won't be any trouble, and she'll be quiet because she doesn't talk. Promise." He stood tall in the darkness. "I need to stay and look for my dad. When I'm older."

Troy got to his feet. "I can't, I'm sorry." He reached all the way down and placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Besides, she'll miss you."

Ollie nodded. "I know. But I'll feel better if she's safe."

"That's just it, Ollie. She wouldn't be safe." Troy headed off into the darkness.

That night Troy slept beside his small rowboat on the shore, and his usual dreams of longing for Yrsa started normally – he was running up the hill toward the clan settlement, and she came and stood out on her front porch. She waved. And he stopped to look up at her magnificence – her blonde hair was out of its usual plaits she wore when hunting or fighting, and was flowing over her shoulders, that were covered in the swirling green clan tattoos.

She had on her leather dress that was strips hanging down over her muscular thighs, and she wore a breast plate of some sort of beaten metal.

She reached up to place her hand on the object hanging around her neck – his wristwatch, just the face with no band, and she dragged it free and held it up.

He felt his heart was going to explode, and he began to run up the hill to her. But she screamed and pointed. Pointed at something behind him.

Troy turned and saw a bonfire, and men, small, normal-sized men throwing children into the flames to roast them alive. He heard Yrsa screaming, and his own voice yelling. The marauders had come, come for them all.

Yrsa then glared at him with an accusing stare that wilted his heart. His dream had turned to a nightmare.

Before dawn he gave up trying to sleep and sat up. He felt he was in hell with the decision he had to make. He knew for sure that the marauders would find the little fishing village. And though their plans for the group was horrible, after what he had done to their raiding party would mean every ounce of payback they wanted to inflict on him, would be rained down on them – torture, cannibalism, slavery, and then death, which might be a mercy by the time that occurred.

In Troy's previous life in the CIA he had seen what human beings were capable of. And it was fucking horrible.

He put his head in his large hands. "I can't do it," he muttered.

"Do what?" Ollie asked.

"Jesus." He looked up and the boy was standing beside the boat.

"What the hell, kid?" Troy shook his head.

"You were having a bad dream," Ollie said.

"You got that right," Troy scoffed.

"Who's Yrsa?" Ollie asked. "You yelled her name. You were smiling. Well, you were at first."

"She's my..." Troy began. "My friend."

"Your girlfriend?" Ollie pressed.

"I guess," Troy sighed.

"And you left her behind?" Ollie frowned.

"Yes." He exhaled and rubbed bleary eyes.

"Why? Did you, um, stop liking her?" Ollie frowned.

"No, no. I had to... keep a promise to someone." He scoffed softly. "Doesn't matter now."

"But you want to get back to her. Is that why you're going home?" Ollie looked up at him.

"You ask a lot of questions, kid." Troy stood, his towering physique making the boy back up a step. "Let's head up to your village. I have some questions for them."

After breakfast of some homemade bread and wild honey, Troy gathered the small community together.

Ideally, he wanted to dissuade them from wanting to come with him. But he knew now he couldn't just leave them. He wanted to see if there were other options for them.

He sat on a tree stump in the center of the group, and the villagers gathered around; some sitting on homemade chairs, some on the ground, and some standing.

"Where I come from, came from, is a place of horrors. Ancient creatures roam the land, predators that hunt night and day. Originally, the group I arrived there with had guns, bombs, knives, and all sorts of support technologies. Plus they were strong people."

He looked slowly along the villagers' faces. "They were all killed."

He drew in a deep breath. "I have to be upfront with you all. If you went there many of you, if not all of you, would be killed. And probably eaten."

He saw that many of their faces were now pale. There were three young men, and four women all in their twenties. A group of three older people, plus Agnetha. And the rest, about thirteen, were all children ranging in ages from twelve down to a toddler of maybe two.

“But you survived,” one of the young men said. “How?”

“Luck.” Troy half smiled. “And I was taken in by the locals. Vikings who had been trapped there for a thousand years.”

“Vikings,” Ollie breathed, his eyes near luminous with excitement.

“I have a question, ah, it’s Sigmund again.” The young man grinned. “Were you small, I mean, normal-sized when you first got there?”

“Yes,” Troy replied. “And I was there two years. And before you ask, something on that island made us grow and get stronger. Anne, the girl I was with, said it might be the iridium, or it might have been a number of other things.” He shrugged. “So, I’m just guessing. But she also said it might have given us all sorts of internal cancers.”

“So, we could grow too?” another of the young men asked.

“Maybe. If you lived long enough.” Troy sat back.

Agnetha stood up and folded her arms. “You said the Vikings took you in. Would they take us in? Now that you are friendly with them.”

Troy turned to her. “I had to fight to the death in an arena. Against a dinosaur, and then one of their warriors, bigger than I am. Luckily, I won. And only then did they take me in.”

“Would we need to fight?” an older man, Gunther, asked.

“If my friend is there, then maybe no,” Troy replied.

“Your girlfriend?” Ollie asked.

“My friend. She is the chieftain. But...” Troy shared a half smile. “I have been gone a long time. Things might have changed. There might even be a new chieftain, who may decide to kill us all on sight.”

“Or they may not,” Agnetha said, her direct gaze holding his eyes for a moment before she turned to her group. “This is the way I see it; if we stay here, or even move to a new place, then eventually the marauders *will* find us. Of this I have no doubt, because they have nothing better to do than search for people like us. It is how they survive. And if they do find us, we’ll end up dead, killed horribly, or spending the rest of our lives as slaves.”

She turned to face Troy. “And if Troy kindly allows us to come with him, then there is a chance many of us will die. But there is also a chance many of us will live. So my people, into the fat or into the fire. Every choice has risks. We will vote. And those that vote to stay will not be forced to come. Everyone can choose their own path and destiny.”

They voted. And the majority voted to go with Troy, and only three of the older folk decided to stay. Troy guessed the elderly villagers might have voted to come, but guessed the trip and destination would have been too arduous for them, so voted to not slow the others down. He noticed Agnetha also voted to stay, and that wasn’t acceptable as she had become their defacto leader.

He didn't want this outcome. But now it was thrust upon him, he needed to make the best of it.

"I have two conditions." Troy rose to his feet, towering over them. "First, we need to find more boats, bigger and sound enough to travel for six days across cold and dangerous waters. And they must travel by sail." He looked to the older woman. "And secondly, you must accompany us, Agnetha. The group will need your guidance and wisdom."

She seemed to think for a moment, but then nodded once. "Done. Almost." Her lips pressed together for a moment, and she sought out the gaze of the other three elders. "You three must also come." She nodded to one of the silver-haired men. "Oder, you are a biologist and scientist. Your knowledge will be needed. Franz, you were once a carpenter, and Gillian, you made clothing. Your skills will also be needed."

She turned back to Troy. "But we have no larger boats."

"I think I know where we can get some boats." He looked at the group. "Who can sail?"

Everyone, even Ollie and his cousin, Anna, raised their hands.

"Good." Troy smiled, and then pointed at several of the young men and women. "Three groups, two per boat. We'll head to the mainland harbor tonight and choose some seaworthy boats that are still moored there."

"The marauders may be watching," Agnetha said softly.

"Probably. So we must be in and out quickly and quietly." He clapped his large hands together. "Start to pack. We get the boats tonight, and sail tomorrow. We need to follow the warm currents and find Odin's Gate while it's open."

"Odin's Gate," Ollie repeated with luminous eyes.

If we can find the gate, he thought, and avoid the ice hidden within the fog banks, and don't get eaten once there, then... He sighed. ...and he had no all-seeing-dragon-eye to guide him this time.

I must be insane, he thought, and half smiled. I guess it's true what they say: it's easier to get older than it is to get wiser.

That evening Troy took the six young people, three men and three women – Gunter, Frederick, Hakon, and Hailee, Tuva, and Astrid, in one of the marauders' long row boats, and had four of them on the new oars they had secured.

The villagers pulled long and deep and were adept enough to do so without making any noise and barely a ripple.

The sun had just gone down, and the spring warmth rapidly left the air. He had passed by the mainland harbor before and seen many of the boats still bobbing at their docks or moored off shore, tied up to

buoys. The town itself was in ruins, and he guessed this was why the boats were still there – the owners were probably dead or scattered before they could take to the water.

All his small team had knives, but even though they were fit, young, and enthusiastic, none of them knew what it took to be in a fight to the death. That's why the job would take a little longer than it could have – as they'd avoid conflict, and each boat they checked out would be done with Troy tagging along – he wanted no ambushes.

As they came in close, Troy stopped them rowing and put his finger to his lips. Their boat glided into the center of the small inlet, and they sat slowly just looking about. There was no sound, no lights, or even the smell of smoke.

"Ghost town," Gunter whispered after a while.

"I hope it stays like this," Hailee replied.

Troy inhaled, smelling the distant rocks exposed by the tide. He looked along the dark coast and had the prickling feeling on his neck that they were being watched. They probably were, but he just hoped it was from just a few stragglers and not the marauders. And definitely not dragons.

He then turned to the boats; there were many that seemed suitable, but they needed to be checked for leaks, quality of sails, ropes and rigging, and also to ensure they were suitable from a health perspective; there had to be no rotting corpses below deck. Or any live humans waiting to attack.

"It's gonna take a while. You all know what to look for. Two teams of three-a-piece. If the boat is no good, exit and we'll move to the next. If it's good and ready to go, we leave a team onboard, and you wait for my signal before pulling up the anchor. Then we move to the next. I want three boats. No noise."

As Troy expected, they found many of the boats having not been hauled up onto drydock for many years, had rotted hulls, and were full of stinking water. It was after a few hours they found their first viable boat; a fifty-foot sail boat, modern, sails and rigging pristine, and would have been new when the dragon horde first swept through, scattering the people.

Troy left a two person crew behind, Hakon and Astrid, and they continued their search of the boat, but now it was for things they could use like flare guns and medical kits.

After another hour, they only found one more boat of quality. The upside it was a large one, and again fairly new. Troy guessed that was as good as it was going to get so he left behind Gunter, Frederick, and Tuva onboard, and then rowed back to let Hailee scamper up onto the original boat.

His instructions to both crews were to rig the sails, and then in five

more minutes haul anchor, quickly, and head straight out.

When the time came, there were a few delays getting the anchors in, and the clang of steel against the side of the boats was noisy as all hell and it rang out loud across the water – if there was anyone there, they could not fail to miss it.

Troy watched but saw no signs of movement or lights coming on. He was starting to think they might have just pulled it off as the two sail boats languidly headed out on the near non-existent breeze, and Troy rowed behind them, checking them over, and turning from time to time to scan the shoreline – all clear, all quiet, and all good.

In ten more minutes they were on their way home and the small fishing town grew smaller behind them.

He felt good – step one completed without a single injury or death – and now they had two large and seaworthy boats.

Jurgan Krillin crouched on the broken wall and watched the dark shapes of the ships head out. His eyes narrowed, and even just relying on the moonlight he could make out the oversized form in the rowing boat.

His two surviving raiders were telling the truth – the small settlement did have a giant as a protector.

He half smiled. He regretted now he had them executed for lying and for being cowards. He could use two more trusted men. Too late now.

“Prepare the boats. We will visit these people and see what they are planning with their new ships.”

“How many?” one asked.

“They killed my brother.” Jurgan turned to glare. “Fucking all of them.”

The man scampered away.

Jurgan’s eyes narrowed. “And we will find out if this giant bleeds.” He wagged his finger at the disappearing boats. “You shouldn’t have killed Hagen. He was an asshole, but he was my blood. And now I will take your big head for my wall.”

CHAPTER 07

Beneath the ice of Greenland on the eastern side of Lemuria, Ogen and the warriors had trekked through the jungle to the far valley.

Ogen was the chieftain of the Aegir clan and he needed to see for himself what had been driving away the game in the area, and also more importantly, to find out what was causing his people who went out foraging and hunting to go missing.

The small party of six huge warriors stopped on the edge of the steep valley cliff wall. Down below it was thick jungle with a curling mist intertwining amongst thick boughs, and fat palm fronds dripping with water.

There was no chance to see the ground, which might be ten feet or a hundred below that dense canopy.

"The scent," Hagar whispered.

Ogen nodded to his friend. "I smell it." He looked over the tree tops. "And where are the flyers? Or the sounds. It is like a death garden down there."

"I don't like it," Bodil said from behind the pair.

"I don't either," Ogen spoke over his shoulder. "But that is why we are here and where we must go."

Ogen led them down, and as they neared the bottom they crossed under the huge umbrella-like canopies of the trees. The shadows thrown down sheltered them from the ice ceiling and so the temperature was a little warmer. But even though it was only midday, it was a shadowy world. And a silent one.

"That smell is stronger," Hagar said.

"Keep it to yourself or brother Bodil will tell us he doesn't like it again." He turned to grin at Bodil.

Bodil raised his eyebrows. "I don't like it."

Ogen waved them on but moved cautiously. Fact was the smell unsettled him. Though he thought it might be some sort of new plant with an acrid sap, it reminded him of something hiding in his memory he couldn't quite place.

They continued on for another fifteen minutes until there was a hiss from behind him. He turned to see Njord holding up something he had found that looked like a scrap of rag.

"This was Balke's, his tunic; I remember it." He crossed to Ogen and held it out.

Ogen looked at the thing. It was leather, toughened, but still it had

been shredded. He brought it close to his nose. It stank of that weird acrid scent.

“Phew.” He jerked it away from his face.

“He wouldn’t have taken it off. It was his favorite tunic,” Njord said.

“Then someone took it off him. Or ripped it from him.” Ogen turned back. “But Balke never came back home. So they also took him.”

“Who? What did?” Hagar asked.

“That’s what we are here for.” Ogen turned away.

He led them on, and it wasn’t long before the odor became heavier and made their eyes water. And just as the chieftain was going to turn them back they saw the first piles of bones.

There were mounds of them, of all types of animals, and all stacked like cord wood. Some of the bones were fresh and had scrapings of red meat still on their lengths.

Njord raised an arm, pointing. “Balke.” There was a skull with a missing tooth just off center. “I recognize his gap-tooth grin.” The man fumed. “What could do this?”

“Silence,” Ogen demanded.

The men closed their mouths and tried to quiet their breathing. Ogen frowned, hearing something but unsure what it was. He slowly sunk down and put his ear to the jungle floor.

He heard it clearly then – scratching or digging.

It got louder and he got to his knees. “Something is coming.”

Ogen got to his feet and drew his axe. The warriors pulled their own weapons and stood in a ring facing outwards.

“Where is it coming from?” Hagar asked. “I see nothing.”

Around them lumps in the earth started to form. They were huge boils that bulged upwards, one, two, three feet across, and then like massive canker sores they burst open, spewing out a stream of foot-long, shining, black bodies with bristling antenna and clicking mandibles.

Ogen suddenly recognized what they were and what that smell had been. “*Morwi*,” he yelled. “*Run*.”

The six big men ran, Hagar in the lead with Njord, then Ogen, Bodil, and coming up behind was their two biggest men, Orwig and the large of girth, Balder.

The men were fit and ran hard, but the ants were faster, and in seconds the undergrowth bristled with the surge of scuttling bodies, like a tide of carnivorous death.

Ogen half turned. “Run, run like you’ve never run...”

He saw Balder straggling, his huge stomach and weight of his leather armor and axe holding him back. In seconds more the wave of

glistering black morwi caught him.

They surged up his body, and the big man swung his axe, pounded his free fist into his own body, but the sharp legs hung on, and when he was covered with enough of them, they must have stung all at once.

His screams were loud as he was brought down.

The last thing Ogen saw of him before he turned away was his huge body sliding along the ground, back to one of the open sores in the earth. And he knew what for – to be taken apart and consumed down in the darkness so his bones could soon join the growing pile of previous meals.

He put his head down and ran. The younger men ran faster, and he yelled to Hagar, the youngest and swiftest runner amongst them.

“Run ahead, Hagar. Tell them of this. Tell them what now hunts in their forests.”

The young man turned to frown. “Never, I will...”

“*I command you*,” Ogen roared. “Tell the Fjall queen. Hurry, do not look back.”

“My chieftain.” Hagar put his head down and sprinted off.

Ogen knew the horde would run them down. Already, he could hear them just paces behind him. All he could do now was slow them down with another offering of meat. At least young Hagar could warn the clans so they could fight another day.

He had taken a vow to defend his people. And he would fight to the death to do that.

Ogen stopped and turned. And clanged his sword and axe together.

He held his arms wide for a moment. “*Odi-iiin*.”

The other men, seeing this, did the same. Courage was contagious. And all warriors of the Aegis clan desired one thing in death – a noble death in battle, ensuring a place at Odin’s side in his Great Hall as they awaited the call to Ragnarök.

They all stopped forming a line, breathing hard, and holding their weapons ready.

The wave of scuttling black bodies surged over them. Swords swept on arcs, axes chopped, and hammers thumped down, destroying dozens upon dozens of the morwi. But then in their place there were hundreds more.

It was over quickly, as the number of morwi were so many they covered the men completely, shutting out the light. Ogen could feel their sharp pointed feet in his mouth and ears, and they suddenly stopped moving.

Here it comes, he knew.

Sure enough the bolts of searing pain, like having his skin pierced by liquid fire was near unbearable. He fell like a tree and the venom

locked his limbs up tight. He just wished it would have numbed him, as he knew what was in store for them all.

His eyes were stuck open, and the massed morwi cleared from his body, but a number of them dragged him along the ground, to those holes in the earth up ahead.

Beside him he saw Njord, and the man was facing him, his eyes also open, but his face a frozen mask of pain. Was he too still in there silently screaming, calling for help? Or calling for death? Was he looking back at his chieftain, begging him to do something?

It mattered not as Ogen couldn't even close his eyes or look away.

In minutes more he was dragged deeper, and deeper still. He could hear the scuttling bodies, and knew he was in their world now.

He knew they needed the information. They needed the clans to come together to fight this attack on their forest.

As he was dragged into the dark hole, he didn't regret his mission, but he knew that the price he would pay for what they learned would be *extreme*.

The young Aegir warrior, Hagar, never looked back.

He ran harder and faster than he had ever run in his life. When the pain in his side stabbed at him, and when the spittle in his mouth dried to foam, and when his thighs burned, he kept going.

He knew the morwi would come for them – come for all of them – the warriors, the mothers and their children, the old, every Viking clan in the land.

He had been young, but Hagar remembered now the morwi pit. He remembered the captives and enemies they had thrown in there. But it had been there before any of them had even been born, and he never wondered what those little monstrosities did below the ground.

And when the Fjall buried their hive, now he knew, they weren't killed. Instead they had bided their time and then dug their way out. And now they felt they had the numbers to rise up.

Hagar bypassed the track leading to his camp and ran on. His heart hammered so hard in his chest he felt sick from exhaustion, but Ogen had said to tell the Fjall queen. The woman called Yrsa, and her small but fearsome war counsellor, who turned out to be a mighty warrior who had slain the huge Brunor.

The Fjall had defeated the morwi before. They would know what to do.

In half a day, he had been reduced to staggering along the track to the mountainside village, when a Fjall warrior stepped out, stopping him.

Hagar went to his hands and knees exhausted. "I have an urgent message for the queen. From Ogen. An attack."

The man called over his shoulder and two more warriors appeared. They took one look at the disheveled and exhausted Aegir man and carried him back to their village and lay him in the village square.

The senior Fjall warrior then jogged up the pathway to the chieftain's hut and in moments more a group appeared with the chieftain woman in their midst.

Hagar struggled to stand and bowed as she approached.

"What is this attack you speak of?" she demanded.

Hagar looked up at her. "The morwi," he gasped.

Morwi. The very name made Yrsa feel sick in her stomach.

Troyson had told her they may come back, and the clan was to remain vigilant as they could be a danger not just to the clans, but all of Lemuria, even a greater one than the drekka itself.

"How many? Where?" she demanded. "Tell me everything."

Hagar nodded. "We tracked them to the far valley. Our warriors and scouts had been disappearing. And there was little game anymore."

The Fjall warriors murmured and cast glances at each other. Yrsa knew this was what was happening in their lands also.

"Ogen took a war party into the dark valley. We found evidence of our missing people there. And then the morwi rose up and attacked us." Hagar grimaced. "Ogen ordered me to tell you." He hung his head. "I wanted to stay and fight, but..." he looked up. "He said you would know what to do."

"And Ogen?" she asked.

Hagar shook his head. "I didn't see. But I heard their screams."

Yrsa nodded. She didn't doubt the young warrior's bravery, and he would have been torn by his chieftain's order and wanting to fight and die with his brothers. She also had no doubt that there would be no survivors. She had seen first-hand the work of the morwi, and the horrifying little creatures killed and ate everything they could catch.

"Hagar, you said they came out of the ground?" she probed.

"Yes." He slumped.

She exhaled slowly. "Then they are out." She walked a few paces to stare out over the jungle.

Troyson had told her they could tunnel great distances and have giant nests hidden below ground. With more morwi warriors than all the clans put together.

They had burned and buried them last time. But this time there would be more. And they would have more places to surface.

Yrsa closed her eyes for a moment. Troyson would know what to

do, she thought agonizingly. She opened her eyes. But Troyson wasn't here, and the defense of the clan was up to her.

She turned to Hagar. "There is a war coming – the clans against the morwi – all need to fight. We will need to hold a war counsel and prepare a plan."

She placed a hand on the young warrior's shoulder. "You did well, and you shall have food and water," she said. "But your job is not finished yet. Some of my warriors will accompany you to your camp. You must bring them all here, now. The morwi will be on the march soon and nothing will be able to stand in their way."

Hagar got his food and water and gulped it all down. Afterwards, he and some Fjall soon departed for the lands of the Aegir.

"War counsel this night." She watched them go for a moment and then turned to her people. "We must ready ourselves."

The group dispersed and Yrsa walked a few paces to a large flat rock that looked out over the jungle. There was nothing ominous that she could see, but she knew that below that green roof there could be an army massing. And one that Troyson Strom had warned her about.

What would or could she do if they came? It seems Ogen and his war party had been overwhelmed in seconds, and the only survivor had done so because he had run from the attack.

Would that now be their only option? Running?

Troyson had said that would not be a long term solution as eventually the morwi would consume everything on the island. And then even the plants would be eaten.

She lifted her gaze and could just make out a sliver of silvery water through the trees. A mad but comforting thought crossed her mind – could she take her people and leave for Troyson's land?

After a moment she shook her head. She knew she was only even thinking that because she had a selfish notion of finding him. A true leader would stay and fight and protect her people and their land.

Without a doubt she was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for the clan and sit beside Odin in his Great Hall.

But was she willing to sacrifice Stromson?

No.

Yrsa frowned as she tried to remember what Troyson had told her about the morwi – they were ruled by a queen, just like the Fjall. They never slept, and were joined by their minds, and would fight even when broken into pieces or chopped in half. She looked up. And they hated fire, and they hated water, and could not swim.

They needed time right now. Perhaps she could move the clan across the river. It would mean surrendering the low lands to the morwi. But if the horde couldn't cross the river, then the clans might be safe there.

At least for a while, she guessed. Because Troyson had also told her that though the normal morwi were near mindless, the queen was smart, and could make plans.

She sighed. Yrsa just hoped she was smarter and her plans better.

It was just a day later when some of the warriors returned to the village, rushing to her, holding between them a cloak with something wrapped within it.

They got down on one knee and laid it before her.

She bade them open it, and when they unfurled it inside was a pile of glistening, red bones.

“What is this?” she demanded.

One of the men looked up. “It is Zena, the gatherer. She was out with a group collecting berries.” The warrior looked down at the mass. “We were hunting and heard them scream. We came to them and saw the morwi attack.”

He gritted his teeth. “They ate her down to this in the time it takes to just draw a few breaths.”

“The others?” Yrsa asked.

He looked up. “Taken.”

“Taken?” she repeated softly.

She saw that one of the arm bones amongst the pile still had a small bracelet around it. She knew Zena.

“Where?” she asked.

“Just at the bottom of the craggy hill,” he replied.

That was only one day from them.

She straightened her shoulders. “Then our enemy is here. We either push them back, or we die.”

Yrsa turned back to the pathway and headed up to her chieftain’s hut overlooking the clan. She needed to consult the elders about moving the clan and her war plan.

Her time was up.

CHAPTER 08

Norway, several miles up the coast from Tjøtta and the fishing village.

The ancient cephalopod settled on the bottom. It fanned out its eight limbs stretching out over seventy feet and rested the huge shell behind it.

Its skin was flaking away in slimy, gossamer sheets, and its normal mottled colors that could dapple from brick red, to emerald green when it wished, were now a grey, drab palette.

It was starving and though it had been hunting for weeks it had found nothing substantial to feed on. There were plenty of smaller fish, but they were too fast for it to catch, and it had satisfied itself with crustaceans it could ferret out from between the cracks in the sea bottom rocks.

Down in the inky blackness it had sensed the surface water changing temperature, heralding the start of the coming warm season, and it had moved down the coast hoping the warmth would mean more of the small bipeds might take to the water, or even be close to the shore.

Its pair of truck-wheel-sized eyes saw clearly in the gloomy water, and its skin was sensitive to vibrations – and it felt and heard the water movement that meant things were traveling on the surface.

Sound and movement meant life. And life meant food, and its digestive juices roiled inside it, forcing it to speed over the sea bottom like a huge blanket toward the island.

It was early morning as Erik took the net down to the shoreline and out to a rocky headland he knew ended at deeper water. It was just as the sun was coming up and he knew that the larger pelagic fish shot by at the surface as they headed up the coast, and a well-cast net could grab a dozen or more, a good meal for the villagers.

He was eighteen, just like his girlfriend Anja, but where he was tall, blonde, and slightly underweight, she was dark-haired and well rounded. Another difference was she was nervous about the coming voyage to this hidden and mysterious island of Lemuria that the giant had come from. But he was excited because day-to-day so little happened in the village this seemed an adventure beyond his dreams.

The giant Viking man, Troy, had told them of a land that was

dangerous and had all manner of terrifying creatures, but none of that worried him. He feared the marauders more and saw what they had done to old Anders – that was not a way for anyone to end their life.

He shivered as he remembered, and then he cursed them all to hell.

He carried the net to the rock shelf end, and with a twist of his entire upper body cast the net, its fine mesh blooming wide to drop in a circle forty feet across – it was a good cast.

He immediately began to pull on the rope that acted like a drawstring to turn the net into a giant bag.

As he pulled it in, his fingers numbed a little. Even though the spring warmth was here, the water was still cold. He wouldn't be swimming for a while, that's for sure.

After a few more moments he knew the bag held little or nothing, as there was no extra weight there. In three more minutes when he had the bag all the way, it was confirmed.

It was unusual, as there were always fish moving across the point as there was a channel there, and one thing about there being less fishermen these days, was that usually meant more fish.

He prepared the net again, and this time hoisted it out at a slightly different angle – it was another good cast, the net flaring wide, and dropping onto the water's surface where he allowed it to sink a dozen feet before tugging the bag closed.

This time he had something as there was immediate weight and resistance – he tugged, it tugged back.

"Big." He grinned and tugged even harder.

The line and net had a little elastic give in it, so it stretched, but still didn't seem to budge. Erik momentarily thought he might have snagged a rock and his spirits wilted. But then it began to come in. And he still felt good weight there.

He whistled as he pulled it in. The sun hadn't lifted enough for him to see below the dark water's surface, and he wished he could reach his lantern, or even better, had a flashlight. He snorted. The entire village had just one remaining flashlight so he doubted the elders would let him use it for his fishing.

The line and net came in quickly now – too quickly – and his expectations swung the other way; there wasn't enough weight there. That could mean when the net seemed to have gotten stuck he had snagged it on some rocks and ripped the mesh.

Just as he came to the last dozen or so feet of rope it began to surface. But it wasn't the mesh net filled with silver flipping-flapping bodies but something glistening, muscular, and trunk-like.

Then from beside it another of the trunk things shot from the water, fast, and was around his legs before he could get out of the way.

Erik was hauled off his feet and threw his arms out to try and grip the rock. But whatever had him, was bigger and far more powerful than he was.

"Hel..."

In he went. And the water was even colder than he expected.

The huge cephalopod dragged the struggling biped straight down and quickly wrapped several long and powerful limbs around it. The striated muscles flexed and exerted a titanic pressure on the warm blooded animal, crumbling the bones and in seconds turning the body to pulp. The only thing it avoided was the head which it removed and set aside for later.

Then it fed the body to its waiting beak and in moments more the ravenous monster had devoured it all. Its body surged in bands of red and orange and then green in delight at the amount of food. More meat than it had consumed in months.

It knew from past foraging the bipeds gathered in herds, and it had at last found one. It also knew that it only needed to wait for more to arrive.

The cephalopod spread out on the sea bottom and its massive eyes watched the surface, waiting for the hint of movement, and the chance to feed again.

CHAPTER 09

Troy followed the boats back to the villagers' island and watched as they were moored close to the beach. The group leapt over the side to wade up onto shore to the cheers from their family and friends. It was a win, he guessed, but he doubted they'd cheer if or when they arrived on Lemuria.

They thought they were escaping danger, but they were wrong. His conscience still tormented him over whether he was doing the right thing in taking them somewhere potentially far worse than where they were. Marauders or no marauders.

Troy came up the beach deep in thought, and a small body fell in beside him.

"I knew you'd do it." Ollie grinned up at him.

"Really?" Troy smiled back. "I think it was luck that won the day." He couldn't help liking the persistent and annoying kid.

"Nah, only a giant could pull off a giant task like that." Ollie turned back. "Many of the people said they can't trust you. But I told them we could." He beamed up at him. "Because I trust you," he said resolutely.

That evening it was a mix of somberness and quiet talking amongst the older people but from the younger group there was excitement, as there always would be.

Many knew danger, but nothing like what they might soon face. Troy didn't concern himself about if they'd even make it to Lemuria as they first needed to cross the freezing waters, navigate through the floating bergs, and the walls of mist. Then, and only then, they needed to look out for the rift wall.

How many days would he give it, of travelling up and down along the ice-walled coast looking for something only about fifty feet wide in a coastline thousands of miles of long? They may die of hunger and thirst without ever finding it.

Troy pushed that thought aside. He knew he'd never give up and would keep looking until he was dead at the wheel.

As Troy sat and stared at nothing he picked up a stick and fiddled with it, breaking it in his hands as his mind worked on the odds stacked against him.

Because, even if he did find the Gate, and travelled in through it. And if they made it alive to Yrsa's village. And if she was still there, and still waiting for him after he abandoned her, what would she

make of him, then, bringing a group of small useless humans, who were of less use to the clan than children?

He sighed. "One problem at a time," he whispered and got to his feet.

He saw Agnetha waiting for him, and he walked up and stopped before her.

She raised an eyebrow. "You seem to be a man who does what he says he is going to do," she said. "So I thank you."

Troy half smiled. "That was the easy part so don't thank me just yet." He looked up at the clear sky. There was a light breeze blowing and above the cooking smells he detected pine trees, salt air, and drying fish.

"Everything you know will change," he said. "Lemuria is a dangerous jungle. Cool but humid, and where every living thing on land and water is potentially dangerous." He looked down at the older woman. "Though it should only take us five days to arrive on the coast of Greenland, if we have favorable winds, we might spend days, weeks, locating the entrance. Or we may never find it at all."

Agnetha half smiled. "If you're trying to dissuade me, you're not doing a good job." She looked over her shoulder at her fellow villagers and then back to him. "Not just Norway, but this world needs to heal. It may take a few years or many generations. For now it belongs to the dragons and the savages. If we meet either of those threats again out here, it'll be the end of us."

"Okay." Troy chuckled softly. "But don't say I didn't try and warn you."

"We won't. And you might find we're tougher than you think." Agnetha smiled up at him. "We'll be ready when you say."

Anja hadn't seen Erik all morning and after checking his cabin and finding it empty, she was even more confused. She headed over to speak to his best friend.

"Aksel, have you seen Erik? He's not in his cabin and he promised to have lunch with me."

Aksel stopped his work on repairing a length of rope in preparation for their voyage and looked up. "Last night he said he might go fishing early." He shrugged. "And that was usually before sunup, so by now..." He hiked his shoulders again.

Anja understood; that meant he should have been back by now. And right now it was close to ten o'clock.

She knew where he fished so headed down to the rocks. Maybe he had caught so many fish he was having trouble bringing them all home.

It only took her five minutes to skip down along the path to the

rocky western shoreline and find the favorite little outcrop he used to like to stand on and cast his net out into the deeper channel.

She slowed as she saw his basket was there, a bucket for the net, and his shoes off so he could keep them dry. There was also his old lantern, and though the sun was up now, she saw there was still a small flame working inside the glass.

“Erik?” she called.

After a moment she walked closer to his kit, looking one way then the other. No net, no Erik anywhere.

“*Erik!*” she tried, louder this time.

She walked out onto the jutting rocks, and looked in the bucket and lifted the basket top. There was a piece of bread and wrapped cheeses. Both untouched. She knew what Erik’s appetite was like and there was no way he’d leave his food behind.

And if he wasn’t back at the village, not on the rocks fishing, that left one place – Anja spun to the water.

The tide had come in a lot and the rocks he liked to stand on were becoming submerged and she needed to hop from one slab to the other to avoid the lapping water. She headed out to the farthest one, where he liked to cast from.

She was worried now. “*Eri-iiik!*” she called.

As she looked down into the water the sun momentarily went behind some clouds, and she was sure she saw something move down there; it was like someone pulling a rug from a bed, as the entire sea bottom seemed to slide away.

Anja had no idea what that meant and looked slowly over the water. “*Eri-iiik!*” she put a hand over her eyes, scanning the water’s surface.

She turned away from the sea to look back at the tree line. Squinting, and expecting him to jump out with that cheeky look on his face.

“You better not be joking me,” she warned.

There was the tinkling of falling water behind her and she quickly turned.

About fifty feet out from her, Erik’s head rose from the water.

“Erik?” she squinted. “Erik, come out of there.”

She walked right to the edge of the rocks, toes in the water, and leaned out.

It looked like Erik, but she couldn’t see his face clearly as the sun was behind him. All she could see was that his face looked very pale. No surprise, she guessed, if he had been swimming for a while in the cold water.

“Erik? Are you okay? Can you come in?” She edged closer to the water, but he was still way too far and she hated the thought of

having to go into the icy water fully dressed.

“Please, Erik, swim to me.” She held out her hand.

Erik’s head sunk a few inches to his nose level and glided toward her.

Anja stretched out her arm further, her toes now dipping in the water as she tried to balance.

Erik glided closer – forty feet, thirty, twenty.

Her brows slowly came together – his nose and mouth were still below the water – he hadn’t taken a breath.

“Erik?” She felt a prickle on her neck as her sixth sense was warning her something wasn’t right.

She slowly straightened as he came close enough for her to see him clearly. Erik’s face was ghostly pale as if he was made of wax.

His head rose, and she saw that his mouth hung open, and his eyes were rolled back into his head.

The bile rose in her throat as he rose higher and then came the ragged stump of the neck, and something poking up into it that was a mottled green.

The head rose even higher, and she screamed and turned to run. But it was too late as a muscular limb shot out of the water and grabbed her ankle and with an almighty tug threw her twenty feet out into the cold sea.

Anja spluttered to the surface, and immediately began to swim. But whatever the thing was it had other ideas. From beside her, Erik’s head bobbed up again to keep pace with her.

She screamed, swallowed water, coughed and vomited as she threw one water-logged clothed arm over the other.

It took her several minutes to get to the rocks and she hauled herself up a few feet. But then came the coiled, cold embrace of the thing around her leg and once again she was flung back out into the water.

Anja came to the surface again and tried to swim. And once again on making it to the rocks she was ripped away, losing several fingernails this time, and tossed out into the water.

She surfaced, crying, resigned to her fate and just hung there looking up into the azure blue sky of the midday sunshine and refusing to look at the monster tormenting her from below.

Nothing.

Several minutes went by and she began to tread water.

Anja turned to look out over the ocean, and then back to the shoreline. Perhaps it had gone. She looked back to the rocks just teasingly twenty feet or so from her.

As slowly and quietly as she could manage she began to ease herself back to the rocks. It was difficult now as her fingers and toes

were numb from the freezing water, and her muscles were beginning to lock up. But at least she couldn't feel the pain of her ripped away nails.

She tried to glide rather than swim, and when she was just a few feet from the rock's edge, she felt something at the nape of her neck and turned her head to see Erik's ghastly waxen face sitting on her shoulder.

She screamed and began to cry. It was then that the thing grabbed her, and she felt herself being hauled back through the water at great speed, and this time she was tugged beneath the surface.

When she was at the point of bursting from holding her breath, she was pulled closer, and she saw the thing for the first time – huge silver eyes the size of truck tires regarded her dispassionately, and beneath the bulbous bag-like head, there was a huge body that spread out further than she could see.

The tentacles lifted like the edge of a rug, and she was gently handed to their center. In the shallow water she could see in there, and her breath expired, and the last vestiges of her oxygen burst from her lungs to rush in a stream of freed bubbles to the surface.

Anja sucked in a huge lungful of cold seawater, and her body spasmed and jerked from the shock. Mercifully, she blacked out before she was fed to the four-foot long beak.

Troy had finished exercising – he used a massive rock, lifting it in a form of bench-press, then curls, and squats. He then did an hour sword practice. He knew what formidable and grueling things were coming when he got to the island and was determined to be ready for anything.

Afterwards he sat on a rock to cool down and steam rose from his massive body. He grabbed his sword and a whet stone, and wiped some of the oily perspiration from his brow and smeared it onto the blade and then slowly ran the stone in circles over the edge.

It was a repetitive muscle-memory task and as he did it he let his mind drift. He had been away just over two years now, and reality was he had to steel himself for the fact that he might get there and Yrsa could be dead, or remarried, or just not interested in him anymore. Or the clan might reject him, and he'd find he'd be setting up the island's smallest and most defenseless clan.

He lifted his head and looked into the rising sun. The air around him was still and cool, and peaceful. From here it was hard to believe that the dragons, or drekka, had overrun the Earth, killing billions and driving the remnants of the human race below ground. It was the last great mass extinction for the planet.

He guessed it was the sunshine and no predators that allowed them

to multiply so quickly here. Was it that which kept them in check on the island? If he could find the answer to that question, he might have a solution for the global infection. He made a mental note to speak to Oder, one of the village seniors who in his former life had been a scientist and had experience with biology and chemistry; perhaps he might have some ideas.

He stopped the circular motion of the stone and stared out at the distance. He toyed with the idea of instead of trying to find Odin's Gate, trekking over the frozen surface of Greenland and trying to make it to The Mother of the Sky, the mountain peak that rose above the ice cap, and had a chimney leading all the way down to Lemuria.

He grunted. But even if they could find it, and trek through the miles of snow to get there, then scale the peak, he couldn't imagine climbing down inside the chimney with the children. They'd fall for sure.

He had several options, but every one of them was as bad and dangerous as the next.

Troy sat with the blade across his knees. He had cooled down now and pulled the cloak over his shoulders.

The small snap of a branch from behind him made him smile and he spoke without turning. "You'll need to get better at sneaking up, Ollie, you sound like an elephant."

"An elephant?" Ollie asked.

Troy snorted. He had to remember that he now lived in a world where kids knew what a dragon was but not an elephant.

Ollie crept closer. "Have you killed anything with that?"

"Yes, I have. Many things." He rested the blade on its point and sat back.

"Any, um, people?" the boy asked.

Troy grunted softly. "Only those that deserved it."

"It's giant," Ollie said. "And sharp."

"It needs to be. And this isn't the biggest sword. There are bigger, wielded by bigger men than me." He nodded.

"Will I get a sword on the island?" The boy's eyes were fixed on his blade.

"Maybe a dagger to begin with." Troy chuckled.

He knew to a kid Ollie's age, what was coming was the adventure of a lifetime. And the risks were all part of the game. Perhaps in the boy's mind it was all make believe and anything bad could never happen to him.

"Troy!"

He turned to see Agnetha hurrying towards them. He came to his feet as he saw the pained expression on her face.

"What is it?" He sheathed his sword over his back.

"Some of our young people have gone missing. Erik and Anja," she said.

"Are any boats missing? Maybe they..." he began.

"No, none. We need to look for them. I just hope that..." She grimaced.

He held up a hand. "Don't worry, I doubt the marauders would return so quickly," he said, and only hoped that was true. "Get everyone together, in groups of threes. We fan out and everyone is to take a weapon." He lay a huge hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll find them."

"I hope... I hope so." She wrung her hands for a moment and then nodded and turned to fast walk back to the village.

Ollie looked up at Troy. "I'm going with you on your team."

"No, I think..." Troy looked down at the kid. "Do you know Erik and Anja?" he asked.

"I do," Ollie said confidently.

"Good. Okay, then you're on my team." Troy nodded.

Ollie's smile just about showed every tooth in his head.

"Where would they go?" Troy asked.

"Erik loves net fishing. He's really good at it and goes most mornings. I bet he went there, and fell in. Then Anja fell in trying to help him." He shrugged, but immediately brightened. "Or maybe he's catching a lot of fish for us."

"That must be it," Troy replied. "Show me where." He picked up his harpoon.

The boy led Troy back toward the village for a while and they passed a few other groups fanning out. He was satisfied to see they had garden implements, axes, and a few other hand-held items that would serve as weapons; weapons he hoped they wouldn't need.

Ollie then led Troy down along a track through the forest toward the shoreline to a place Troy had never visited in his short time there.

Eventually they came to rocks, and there was a small outcrop like a natural wharf running a good fifty feet out to where the water seemed a much darker hue.

"It's deep out there; that's why Erik catches so many fish," Ollie pointed. "Yes, yes, I was right; see there, that's his basket and bucket. And his lantern."

Troy stuck his harpoon in the sand at the rock's edge and watched as the boy scampered out onto the rock platform to crouch beside the basket and look inside. He looked up. "No fish." He looked around. "And no net."

"And no Erik," Troy added.

Troy joined him and looked from Erik's basket to the steel blue water. There were a few ripples on the surface from a slight breeze.

He knew it'd be cold, and someone in there might not last too long, especially lean teenagers – maybe fifteen minutes at most – and the pair had been missing for hours.

Ollie walked along the rock platform one way and Troy the other. In a few minutes Troy saw something on the rocks just below the tide line and frowned as he crouched. Four grooves in the moss. He ran his fingers along them.

Shit, he whispered. There was a tiny fingernail embedded in one of them.

He looked out at the water. What did that mean? Someone was in the water, and tried to get out but couldn't. And was dragged back in.

A shark? A whale, or...

"Oh fuck no." He slowly rose to his feet.

From behind there was the sound of cascading water falling and he turned in time to see Ollie being lifted from the rocks. The end of a tentacle was wrapped around his neck and mouth, and his eyes were perfectly round from fear. The boy's legs kicked madly as he was lifted.

Troy sprinted, and as he dived, pulled his blade from over his shoulder and just as the boy was about to be yanked into the water, he slashed out at a place further down the muscular tentacle where it was about a foot thick.

The sharpened blade sliced through the slimy limb and the boy dropped. The tentacle uncoiled from his face and Ollie screamed like a siren and ran toward him. His eyes streamed from abject fear, and also from the ammonia stink in the slime that coated his face. He vomited down his chin.

He grabbed Troy's legs, shaking and still screaming in fear.

Troy continued to face the water, still brandishing the blade. He knew this beast. And he knew it didn't give up easily.

He also now knew what happened to the teenagers. This monster from his island had escaped and was dining on them. If it wasn't driven away or killed it would stay until every one of the villagers had been eaten – it was an alpha predator, and to this monster, they were just a herd of small warm-blooded creatures it liked to feed on.

"Back up," Troy said.

He searched the water but knew with its ability to camouflage itself it could be anywhere below the surface, watching them and waiting for another opportunity to attack. And he also knew the thing knew anger, and revenge.

Troy had hurt it so it would be wanting to tear Troy limb from limb for cutting its arm. And then eat him.

Troy backed up, still with Ollie gripping his leg and pressing his face into Troy's flesh. Troy kept his eyes on the water and held his

sword out.

The thing must have been wary of the blade, and he bet it would be smart and trying to work out how to get the sword from Troy, and then get him in the water, its world, where it was king.

When they got to the shore, Troy peeled the boy off his leg and crouched to hold both of his thin shoulders. "Ollie, listen to me."

The boy was still dazed and unfocussed.

He shook him. "*Ollie!*"

Ollie looked up, with still streaming eyes. "Tell the grownups to meet me here. Bring any liquid fuel you have remaining. *Go!*" He pushed the kid.

Ollie ran a few paces, but then stopped and turned. "Be careful," he said in a tiny voice. Then he turned and ran again.

That's the plan, Troy thought and pulled the harpoon from the sand. He crossed back to Erik's fishing basket and pulled out some spare rope he had that was undoubtedly used for repairing the net line.

The harpoon had a steel loop at its end, and he threaded the rope through, his eyes constantly moving between the harpoon and the sea.

He hated the thought of getting any nearer to the water but knew if he was going to spear the monster he needed to be closer. And he knew getting closer would entice it into an attack.

"I'm the bait." He laughed softly but felt his heart rate kicking up.

Troy had experience with either this guy or one of his cousins on the island. And he knew they were smart, strong, and patient. He also knew that it had caught Erik and Anja, and they were dead, crushed, killed and eaten by the beast. A horrible way for the youngsters to die.

Troy knew there was no compromise – it either ended here and now, or the thing would attack whenever they approached the water or tried to board their boats. It might even come up out of the water and sneak inland to try and pick them from the forest.

He walked forward, hefting the harpoon, and keeping his eyes fixed on the water. Troy blinked a few times as he thought he saw cascading lights under there – as if the sea bottom went from a murky green, to brick red, and then to a soft blue, before vanishing altogether.

His eyes were tired from concentrating, but he needed to stay focused. "Hold it together, buddy," he whispered as he walked a few more steps towards the edge.

"*Troy!*"

He half turned to see Ollie and a group of half a dozen young villagers holding a single jerry can of fuel, plus cudgels, knives, and clubs. And one of them held a burning torch.

Good, he thought.

And when he turned back, his few seconds of distraction had been what the beast had been waiting for.

It surged up onto the rock platform. The monstrous thing's tentacles were as thick around at their base as a horse's girth.

Troy cried out at the sheer size and speed of the attack and stumbled backwards. His plan was to embed the harpoon into one of the eyes – the windows to the soul he had told Yrsa one day. And to the brain.

He threw the harpoon; it was a good throw, but was slightly off target, and it struck and sunk in *between* the eyes, where the skin was far too tough.

The barbed hook on the harpoon held fast and immediately the cephalopod's arms went for it, tugging and trying to pull it out.

Troy drew his sword and fended off a few of the other arms and turned to the villagers.

"Grab the rope," he yelled.

The group did as asked, and they held on tight to the thrashing monster.

Even though there was six of them and they were all fit young men and boys, they were no match for the titanic strength of the creature, and he suddenly realized there was no hope of dragging it from the water.

All they could do was hold it in place for the moment – and that had to be enough.

Troy grabbed the fuel can and the torch and sprinted back to the flailing beast. He felt its colossal arms thumping down onto the rock, and he flipped the lid off the fuel can and tossed it one handed to splash the mottled beast.

Immediately it recoiled from the stinging petrol, and Troy threw the can into the center of the blooming flower of suckers and tentacles.

"That's nothing to what's coming," he said through gritted teeth.

He threw the lit torch.

With a whump, the massive cephalopod went up in an orange fireball.

It squealed.

Troy didn't know if that was just the hiss of escaping gas, but it was a ghastly high-pitched noise that hurt his ears.

But the pain and fury was enough for the thing to double its efforts, and it jerked backwards, pulling the villagers off their feet and then it began to use its long striated muscles to drag itself back in the water. And the men with it.

The courageous young men and boys refused to let go. But they were losing the fight, and the tug-of-war was picking up speed.

“Let go!” Troy yelled.

But whether their muscles had locked in fear or not, they continued to hold on.

The last thing Troy wanted was for any one of them to end up in the water, and in one mighty slice, he used his sword to cut the rope and free the villagers.

Troy turned back just as one of the still burning limbs struck him with such force he was knocked a dozen feet from the rock’s edge and into the water.

He immediately came to the surface, his own hand still locked on his blade, and he could hear Ollie screaming his name as the kid ignored the danger and rushed to the end of the rock ledge.

“No... stay... back,” Troy gasped as he was grabbed around an ankle and dragged down.

The water was freezing as he knew it would be. And it was clear, save for the fragments of charred skin now floating in it.

The tentacle that had been around his ankle now coiled further, taking both his legs and squeezing them tight.

He was dragged deeper and knew as long as it didn’t wrap his chest he still had a full breath and a few minutes. *Only* a few minutes.

He was turned again, as another coil went around his wrist.

Through the watery haze, he saw the thing in its entirety for the first time and was startled by the sheer size of it. The massive shell stretched out behind it vanishing in the blue gloom, and the body must have covered the sea bottom for over seventy feet.

The two giant, pitiless eyes regarded him, their baleful gaze telling him it was going to relish his end. It had probably not felt pain for years, if ever. And the assault on it would be avenged.

Troy knew its mind – the rest of the herd of bipeds would be slowly pulled apart and consumed. Being on an island they wouldn’t even be able to get away. It would have its supply of meat trapped.

Troy was dragged closer as if the thing wanted to examine this huge human in detail before consuming it.

The prehistoric cephalopod had two working eyes, so he had to assume it was a different one he encountered on the island. And in addition it was a hell of a lot bigger. But he was also bigger and stronger.

He had one arm and his head free, and the massive cephalopod eased him closer and began to squeeze. Troy felt his muscles and bones compressing from the colossal strength of the beast. His held breath in his huge lungs that were beginning to burn.

It stared with its goat-like slitted pupil eyes, and Troy stared back. He knew he had one chance, before his breath exploded from him – it was the eyes – they were the weak spot. Window to the soul, window

to the brain.

Troy gripped his sword down by his body, refusing to reveal it, because if he did the creature might recognize it as a weapon and try and snatch it away.

Closer, Troy urged. That's it, closer now.

As the beast brought him to within two feet, the canopy below began to bloom up and open, and he heard the clicking of the huge parrot's beak below that would rend his flesh and break his bones.

In seconds he was so close he could touch it. And that was when Troy lashed out, jamming the sword to the hilt into the huge slitted eye.

There was an explosion of ink, blood, and bubbles, and in a swirl of turbulence the thing darted away, taking Troy with it. He held onto the blade that was stuck in the beast's eye, and it coiled around him and his sword arm and applied enormous pressure.

For the first time, Troy felt pops of light going off in his head and his lungs screamed for him to breathe. He needed to drag in air, but if he did, he would suck in seawater, deep into his lungs and it would be all over.

With his last atoms of energy he used the dragging of the cephalopod to move the blade, stirring it in deep, and hoping he damaged the brain. After a moment, the creature stopped taking him deeper, just as the pressure was becoming agonizing on his eardrums.

The beast relaxed. Long tentacles gently dropped from him, and the colors of its body immediately changed to a drab greyish white.

Troy dragged his sword free, as the flaccid body sank into the dark water. He wanted to watch it go but he knew he'd barely have enough energy and breath to even make it to the surface.

He put the sword over his back and swam up towards the light. Breaching, he inhaled the sweet scent of fresh air, and even though the beast was dead, he wanted to be out of the water.

He swam slowly back to the rocks, his muscles near frozen and not working properly, and then hauled himself agonizingly out of the water with the help of a small boy.

Troy lay there on his back sucking in huge gulps of air. All the villagers just stared in awe at the giant who had climbed from the water, covered in blood and ink, who had just single-handedly killed a monster.

With a groan, Troy slowly rose to his full height, and Ollie let him go as the boy raised his fist. "Troy, the monster killer."

Troy still sucked in lung-filling breaths and looked down to see the boy's eyes were streaming and his chin trembled. He looked up and shared a broken smile. "I knew you'd win."

Troy laughed softly. "Well, that's one of us." He rubbed the kid's

hair. "It's dead now."

"That was an Orthocone squid," Oder Van Horton, one of the village elders said. "I'm a biologist and I know this thing was a remnant species and should have been dead for hundreds of millions of years." He looked up at the blood and mucous spattering Troy. "What's it doing here?"

"It came from where we are going," Troy replied. "This will be the new normal, so think long and hard before deciding to come." He briefly looked out at the water before turning back. "There will be more horrors like this."

"Then Erik and Anja are dead," Oder said softly.

"Yes." Troy wiped long hair back off his face and turned to look out over the dark water.

It all seemed peaceful, and the ocean had already forgotten the battle to the death that went on just below its surface only minutes ago.

"The new normal." Troy exhaled wearily. "Let's go home."

CHAPTER 10

It was another full day before Troy thought they were ready to leave. He had them smoke and dry fish, preserve vegetables, and load drinking water into the three boats. If luck was with them they'd only be sailing five days. But if anything went wrong, they might be on the water for a lot longer.

He even had them fashion extra-long oars for the larger boats, as he knew that when they entered the heavy fog banks the wind might die, and rather than end up becalmed they could steadily move forward. The long oars could also be used to navigate through the ice rift.

He would sail by himself and lead them, and he had the villagers bring enough rope so when they entered the fog banks they could lash the boats together and create a train.

He stood looking over the water to the distance and held up a small compass. The tiny needle pointed north, and he got his bearings – north-north/west would take them past Iceland, and to the east coast of Greenland. Unfortunately, there were no landmarks, and they would need to sail up and down until they found the ice rift. It was a long shot, but something in his gut told him he'd find it.

Troy exhaled, and suddenly felt a shiver of trepidation. He had dreamed of Yrsa nearly every night. Did she still think about him? Or had she moved on after all this time? He couldn't blame her if she had. After all, he had left her to ride in a balloon to his home with what she thought was his woman, Anne.

Time will tell, he thought.

Agnetha joined him. "We're ready." She had on a thick shawl around her shoulders. "The elders will come to the docks to bid you farewell."

"No." Troy turned to her. "To survive we will need youth and strength. And the young will deliver that. But we will need something more than that, and the elders bring vital experience and knowledge. You, Oder the scientist, Yohan, Franz, Gillian, and Eldrik, all have experience and skills that will be invaluable. They're coming too. All of them."

She frowned. "But they may not survive the trip, and you yourself said..."

"True, they might not. But we need them." He smiled down at her. "We'll wait until they're ready. Go and tell them."

She nodded and he could see the tiniest upward curve in her lips at

the news. She hurried off.

Troy walked to the hill that looked down over the small inlet that acted as their harbor. The two large boats, plus his own, were tied off down there. It was a fairly good little fleet, he thought. He wished they had more weapons, but he had seen the men with their modern weapons be cut down in seconds, so it was probably best to stay down and move fast which always worked for him in the past.

He heard the boy before he saw him.

"I'm coming with you in your boat," Ollie said as he held a long stick in one hand like a staff. "I already asked Anna, and she just nodded, because she doesn't..."

"No." Troy turned.

"Awww." Ollie punched his thigh. "But..."

"Your quick thinking will be needed on the other boat. You need to keep the other smaller kids calm. Can you do that for me? I'm relying on you, Ollie." He raised his eyebrows.

Ollie kicked at a small stone and didn't look up. "I guess so."

"Good man. One day, you'll make a fine warrior."

The boy beamed up at him. "I know." He then sprinted off using the stick to swish back and forth at the plants in his way.

It took the elders around four more hours to prepare, and soon they had loaded everyone onto the boats. He tasked a few of them with a final check of their dwellings for anything else that could be used and taken, and then, they were done.

Agneha was last and he helped her up onto her deck. She gripped his hand. "Where one life ends another begins."

He nodded. "What will be will be."

Troy boarded his own boat and unfurled the sail. Behind him the two boats were all waiting and ready, and like a fleet of ancient explorers that left the safety of their small harbor headed out – north-north-west – and to their destiny.

Jurgan's scouts returned, and he listened as he finished his meal. "They've left their village. Three boats, everyone on the island is gone."

Jurgan threw the bone to the ground and wiped his mouth. "So, their voyage has begun." He rubbed a greasy hand through his long beard hair.

He had his two men watching the village for days and knew they had loaded their boats with enough supplies to last a week. And they were not headed up or down the coast, but out to sea. Would they be going to Iceland? Or somewhere else? He needed to find out because they were too big a prize to let go. Plus, he and the giant had a score to settle. That big shit had killed his brother, and though he thought

Hagen was an asshole and probably deserved it, if anyone was going to mete out justice, it was him.

Jurgan turned to the men. "Did you plant it?"

They nodded. "Yes. On the giant's boat. No one saw us."

"Good." He snapped his fingers and the small box with a tiny screen was placed in his hands. He switched it on.

The thing was rare, and its batteries were even rarer. But the tracking device would tell them where the giant took the people.

He saw the blip moving away from them, and its range was fifty miles, so they had plenty of time.

"Load the supplies and prepare the boats. We'll see where they are going. It must be worthwhile and might make them of double value to us."

In thirty minutes they were ready, their six large boats loaded with water, supplies, weapons, and slaves tied together in the hold. In the event the trip took them longer than expected it was good to have a supply of fresh meat available.

Jurgan stood. "I have a good feeling about this."

CHAPTER 11

“Fire,” Yrsa said with folded arms. “Burning pitch.” She paced in front of the three seated clan council members. “We used it before, and we can use it again.”

“But you burn them in one hive, and they simply come out of another,” Ornak, the wisest of them, replied.

“Then we burn that one too. And the next and the next.” Yrsa stopped and turned. “This will not be a short war.”

Ingar tilted her head. “And how will you even get close to them? The Aegir warrior who survived the attack told us they were quickly overwhelmed before they even got close. You will be too.”

Yrsa turned away, knowing they were right. Her warriors would never be able to burn the morwi hive if hundreds or thousands of the things boiled out to attack them. And Troy had told her that unless they found and killed the queen, and she lived deep, then she would just lay more eggs, and grow more warriors.

They thought they had burned and buried the morwi before, but the queen survived, and the hive dug its way out. If the queen survived again, they’d simply wait, and burrow out again in a week, or month, or year.

“Their bites are poison. They lock our muscles and bones so we cannot fight back.” Ragnar exhaled as if he was exhausted. “And though the ormarot root can heal you, it cannot be applied during battle.”

Yrsa nodded as she walked close to one of the walls in the council hut and saw the weapons and armor hanging there that used to belong to chieftains long past. She stood staring at them for a moment.

“Their bites are poison.” She turned. “So we cannot let them bite us.”

Ragnar smiled, nodding.

She smiled back, but hers had little humor in it. “We make thick armor. That cannot be bitten through. Then we can get close enough to pour burning pitch into the hives. All of them. We cook them all in their nests.”

“It might work,” Ornak replied. “Our tailors can make armor from the thickest of hides, and also bog steel.”

“I will lead them,” she said.

The old woman, Ingar, lifted her chin. “Yes. A true chieftain is not afraid of battle. No matter the odds.” She smiled. “And if you fall,

then the Valkyries will lift you up to sit at Odin's right hand to await his call to Ragnarök."

Yrsa sucked in a deep breath, drawing her courage. "I will not fall." She turned. "Because if I do, then the clans will also fall."

The three counsellors began to bang on the table with their knuckles for a moment, before Ornak stopped them.

He stood. "Odin's luck go with you, daughter of Skarde."

She nodded and turned away, her mind thinking of all the things she needed to do – first to the garment makers for their protection. Then weapons. Then she needed to choose her bravest band of warriors.

At her hut she made her plans, and then stopped to turn to look in the direction of Troy's home world.

She knew what she was about to do could mean her end. She wanted to see him one more time before she crossed the rainbow bridge to Valhalla. She wanted to show him the strong son she had bore him. She needed him, and his wise counsel, and it seemed every day she needed him more.

Yrsa closed her eyes and said again the silent prayer that would draw him back to her.

In two days, Yrsa revisited the garment maker who had needed to work with the blacksmith and the jewel maker.

Standing in the center of the room was a suit that was ready to try out. It was of black, toughened leather. The gloves were metallic gauntlets with a style of plating that allowed movement right down to the fingers and good wrist rotation for weapon usage.

The boots were leather, but also had iron plates sewn to them. These, like the gloves, would be strapped to the main suit so they could not be dragged free. Everything must be able to withstand a full attack without being disassembled by the scuttling, horror horde.

The helmets was where the blacksmith and jeweler needed to work together – the bog iron helmets had been beaten out thin and covered the head and affixed to the suit by a collar of leather. They would be restrictive but should work.

Finally, the facial area was a work of art – it had human features, female for Yrsa, but the features were twisted in anger. Yrsa nodded to the metal visage – approving of it – it would reflect her fury.

The eyes were narrowed but each had a slice of clear, shaved crystal inserted so nothing would enter that way.

Yrsa walked around the suit, touching one piece and then the next. She turned and nodded to each of the artisans.

"Before I praise you, let's first see if it will work. I don't want to be facing a thousand morwi and have it fall apart, leaving me naked."

She stood back. "Put it on me."

It took them twenty minutes to assemble the armor over her body and when done she found it as hot and restrictive as it looked.

She still had some mobility, but was determined to make the suits work as they might mean the difference between life and death.

She walked in the suit. Then jogged, then ran. And then drew her sword and made a few swings and thrusts. Finally she sheathed her sword, ran a few paces and dived to the ground, rolling to come back to her feet.

Nothing came off, and no openings appeared. She nodded, satisfied.

"Well done," she said.

The trio bowed. "Our pleasure, my queen," the blacksmith said.

"How long will it take to make twenty of the suits?" she asked.

"Most of the work was in the design. We have plenty of materials."

The cloth maker turned to Yrsa. "The assembly takes some time. If it's just the three of us, it will take a week."

Yrsa shook her head. "I need it sooner. The Aegis clan will be joining us; I'll have their ironsmiths and cloth cutters join you to do the work as well." She unlatched the helmet and slid it off her head.

She smiled. "You have two days. We need to take the war to the morwi. Before they bring it to us."

Exactly two days later they were ready.

Yrsa and her twenty warriors stood at the edge of the village. With them was the young Aegis warrior, Hagar, who had survived the attack on Ogen and his warriors.

He was the only one who knew what they would be facing, and it was a testament to his courage that he not only wanted to return to fight the morwi, but was eager for it.

The day before she had instructed her scouts to find some of the morwi, and in a three foot by three foot cage, they had captured three of them.

Yrsa walked closer and stared in at them. They didn't seem so fearsome now as the foot long, skeletal-looking creatures were totally immobile. Their glossy black segmented bodies hadn't moved a muscle since they went into their prison.

She bent forward to stare in at them and saw their stingers on the end of their tails, a finger-length barb that was sharper than the seamstresses' needles, and she knew carried an agonizing punch.

She had been thrown in the morwi pit and had been stung – it had felt like liquid fire had been forced under her skin.

She stepped back. "My war counselor once said to me, know your enemy. Come and look."

The warriors walked around the cage, peering in at the giant ants.

“Are they dead?” one asked.

Yrsa shook her head. “It seems without their queen to command them, they just freeze.”

“Cowards,” another replied.

“No, no.” Yrsa shook her head. “These soldiers don’t know fear, or love, or hate. They just know eating and fighting. Right now, they are simply... waiting.”

Yrsa backed up. She knew the council of elders would rule the tribe while she was gone, which was to be just five days. But under clan law, she would be given seven days to return, or a new chieftain would be appointed.

She felt they were ready. Each warrior carried a sword and axe, and the last two men carried a mix of oil and pitch. It would be poured into the hives and set alight. Anything that came out of a burning hive was to be crushed or hacked to pieces.

She was under no illusion that they would win in a single day. But her plan was for a long war. If they could continue to disrupt the morwi expansion, then over months, or even years, they may weaken the hive enough that they simply died out.

She scoffed softly. And if they failed, then it was the clan who would die out. Or be eaten.

She turned, drawing her sword. “We will not fail.” She raised her sword. “By Odin’s breath, we will be victorious, and our kin will sleep soundly knowing the morwi are driven from the land.”

Yrsa looked at her line of warriors. In their dark heavily shielded armor, they all looked like the big bugs they were going to fight. She had them do one last body check, looking for even the tiniest gap in their suits.

In her suit the garment makers had strung a blue cape pinned to each of her shoulders. She nodded to Hagar and the young man led them off.

It would take them more than a day to reach the hive place where Ogen and his men had been taken. She prayed they were victorious. But she wished they had more time.

She allowed the group to remove their helmets for the march as the suits were hot and heavy.

Hagar took the group out of the village, and Yrsa said she would catch up – she had one more important thing to do first.

Yrsa squatted in front of the small boy, and he reached up with chubby fingers to run them over her black armor.

“Gaa,” he said with all the seriousness a two year old could muster.

She pulled the blue wristwatch she had on a string around her neck and hung it around his. Stromson lifted it, and then sat down and

began to examine it with all the intensity of a jeweler about to cut a precious stone.

She lay a hand on top of his head. "Your father once said that this small thing told you the time." She smiled as she stroked his dark hair. "I think time is the thing we want the most, but always seem to waste."

She stood and the boy continued to gurgle and play with the stopped timepiece. "He will come soon," she said resolutely.

Yrsa then motioned to the woman minding the small kin while she would be gone, and she came and lifted the boy.

Then Yrsa turned away without looking back. Lest her heart break.

It took the entire day to reach the outskirts of the dark valley where Ogen and his warriors were taken.

She had seen the morwi move, and also listening to Hagar tell of how fast and silent they were when overrunning his clan told her an ambush on sleeping people would mean it would be all over in minutes. Or seconds. So that night's sleep would be in the center of a ring of fires and with a double man watch.

In the early morning mist they donned their helmets and prepared. Yrsa had them light their torches and together they said a final prayer to Odin for luck. And if not luck, then a fast death in battle. The armor-clad warriors then moved out in three lines.

Yrsa saw there was a vine-like grass covering the ground, and already she could smell the morwi – the unpleasant stinging scent they give off made her skin crawl.

Hagar pointed. "Through those trees is a clearing. The hives were in there." He looked about. "All quiet so far."

Yrsa waved them on, going first, and together they walked to the line of trees almost acting like a huge fence around the hives. She saw them then; the mounds rising to her shoulder like putrid boils on the land, and piled beside them were mounds of bones, animal and Viking.

She gritted her teeth, pulled her sword to hold it in two hands and carefully crossed the clearing to the entrance to the morwi kingdom. Yrsa was first to the largest hive opening sitting out by itself and stood looking into the seven-foot tall mound.

There was nothing visible and she looked around; there were half a dozen spread out over about fifty feet. And more beyond a clump of bushes. They needed to attack all of them at once.

"There are more now than when we were attacked just weeks ago," Hagar said. "They have been busy."

"And there'll be more in a week's time. And more again the week after that," Yrsa whispered. "We strike now, or the clans are doomed."

“Then we strike like Thor’s hammer,” Hagar said.

Yrsa moved them forward in their three lines. And when they were at the center of the clearing and the larger group of hives, they paused.

“This is where we were set upon.” Hagar looked about. “Where are they?”

The young Aegis warrior walked up one of the mounds and peered in. He leaned closer, and then thrust his sword into the hole at the top.

In immediate response the tops of the volcano-like mounds exploded in a boiling rush of black bodies as the warrior ants surged forth to attack.

Yrsa pointed her blade at the coming horde. “We clear a path to the hive tops so we can pour in the fire.” She held her sword high for a moment. “*Valhalla!*” She then ran at the sea of giant ants coming at her.

In seconds the entire group was covered from head to foot, and the colossal Vikings slashed, hacked, and crushed many. But most of the morwi refused to be cut down and their struck bodies simply rolled up, and then came back into shape after the blow had completed.

Yrsa could feel and see them use their sharp and powerful mandibles to try and pick apart the thick leather, and also trying to insert their long tail stingers into any potential gaps, but so far their armor held.

The ones climbing on her helmet would stop over her eyes and squirt a milky fluid onto them. Luckily the quartz kept it out because she had no doubt it was their venom and would have blinded her.

In an hour the battle still raged, and the bodies of the ants piled up around the Vikings, and though they were tiring, not one of her warriors had fallen. So far their strategy was working, and a flicker of hope bloomed in Yrsa’s chest.

“Fight on, warriors of Aegis and Fjall. Fight to the hive nests,” she yelled and, placing one foot in front of the other as she moved through the rushing tide of the morwi, stepped toward their nests.

Yrsa ordered the warriors with the oil and flaming torch forward, but the morwi swamped them, attacking the flames and trying to smother them using only their bodies and numbers. They were committing suicide on the fire to remove the threat.

“Protect the fire!” Yrsa yelled.

The largest nest was right before them, and the warriors were bunching up as they fought in a ring to try and keep the ants away from the flames.

Then, as if a switch had been thrown the ants retreated. Yrsa looked around to see the black horde pulling back. And then begin to

reenter the hives.

“What’s happening?” Hagar asked. “Have we won?”

There was silence and no Viking spoke as the very air still hung with an ominous sense of danger.

“Listen,” Yrsa said softly.

There was a faint scratching sound.

“Something is coming.” Yrsa tilted her head. “From where?”

The noise seemed to be coming from all around them. Yrsa looked around holding up her sword dripping with sticky ant blood.

“From below.” She looked down.

“Coming up,” Hagar said.

“No, no, no.” She began to back up. “Digging its way up.” Then she understood. “Run.”

But it was too late.

The ground beneath them gave way, and a massive cavity opened around the Vikings and the entire war party fell into it.

Yrsa felt herself falling, tumbling, striking walls, and falling some more before she impacted heavily, but thankfully on spongy earth. The thumps around her told her that her warriors did the same.

Most of the torches went out, but some of the oil had ignited in midair and splashed the walls, flaming there, and creating a burning hadean effect in the deep cavern.

Hagar sat up. “Look.”

Yrsa lifted her gaze and saw that high above them, the opening they had fallen through was growing smaller. She frowned as she suddenly understood what was happening – she had underestimated the morwi. They were far smarter than she believed. Or something commanding them was.

“It’s the morwi; they’re burying us.” She got to her feet, still looking up.

Yrsa raced to where she could just make out one of the fallen torches, dipped it in the burning oil stuck to the wall and lit it. She found one more and did the same, burying its end in the soft cave wall so they could see.

She held hers up while calling her clan together.

Her warriors grabbed the now mostly empty buckets and held them upright to salvage the remaining oil, and Yrsa looked around at where they now found themselves.

They were in a huge chamber, the walls covered in lumps of yellow, bread-like fungi, and coated with something like a glistening resin to give them solidity. At one end was just walls, leading up toward the rapidly closing hole above them.

She walked to the other end, the darker area, and held up the torch.

“Kregah!” She yelled a Viking war cry and jumped back into her

battle stance.

Just at the limits of the torch light was another huge chamber with tunnels leading off. But it was filled with glistening black bodies, not dozens, or hundreds, but thousands. And at their center was a beast from her darkest nightmares – the queen.

The monstrosity towered over her, with six legs and five foot long flaring red mandibles. Its body was long, twenty feet at least, and ended in a pulpy-looking abdomen. The smaller morwi constantly moved around and over her body, tending to her, feeding her, and taking away the mucous-covered white eggs that were constantly being expelled from her back end.

The monster had eyes half as big as Yrsa that were black bulbs, and unlike the smaller morwi who didn't seem to be able to see all that well, Yrsa knew this creature could see her clearly, and right now, was looking straight at her, *right at her*. Perhaps queen to queen.

Maybe the Vikings' burning torches had changed its plans of an overwhelming horde attack, and instead a soundless order was given. And from below the worker morwi began to work furiously on this huge chamber, and to then undermine them.

As Yrsa watched, the wall in front of her began to grow on each side, bit by bit.

"They're walling us in," Hagar said.

"Right now, there's too many out there," she said. "We wait until they're gone and break through."

Yrsa looked up. There was nothing but darkness now. The roof had been totally closed over. "Or we climb up."

In minutes more the sounds of digging ceased and the wall between her and the queen was now solid. Yrsa walked closer and rapped on it with her knuckles. Then she drew her sword to strike it, hard, with the hilt. It was like stone, and her heart sank.

She pulled off her helmet and sat down.

"Rest," she said.

Rest, she thought. Because they had no choice.

CHAPTER 12

Heading west-north-west on the Norwegian Sea.

Troy used a compass and would also use the stars at night to guide him. He had learned a lot about navigation in two years of basically living on the water, and how to use the wind, waves, and currents.

The first part of the voyage would be easy, as it was open water and clear sky. But when they got closer, the compass would fail, and then they would encounter the fog bank that shrouded the coastline of Greenland for hundreds of miles in either direction to where he needed to go – the huge rift in the ice wall, that would lead him to Odin's Gate. And that meant luck and persistence would be needed.

He reached for his large binoculars and looked into the distance – there was nothing on the horizon. Then he scanned around him, stopping briefly to look over each of the boats in his small flotilla.

All looked to be sailing well, and none were low in the water, indicating they were taking on water.

On deck of one of the boats was the small figure, undoubtedly Ollie, who had his own field glasses, and they were trained on Troy.

The kid kept the glasses to his eyes with one hand and gave Troy a wave with the other. Troy laughed as he waved back. Seemed he had at least one fan.

Troy then scanned the skies; they'd been fortunate so far. Because if they encountered a drekka now, when they were basically too far to seek shelter on land and miles from anywhere, they'd be cooked and eaten.

It was the only flaw in his plan to sail to Lemuria. Everything relied on not meeting a dragon, or anything else large and dangerous in the sea.

He lowered the glasses and looked back up at the sky. It was starting to darken as nightfall was coming. The winds were mild, and there were no clouds anywhere on the horizon, so he hoped to be able to tie the wheel off, keep the sails tight and let the boat sail itself when he wanted to grab some sleep.

Troy tied the wheel off now and sat back in the captain's chair of the sixty-five-foot sloop. There was just the relaxing sounds of creaking ropes, pulleys and shackles, plus the sound of waves being cut as the boat sliced through the small ripples on the surface.

He let his mind wander. Let it take him back in time to the last moment he saw Yrsa. The look on her face as she held his hand. He

didn't, and she didn't, want to let each other's hand go. His sense of duty made him honor a promise to Anne, that ended horribly.

He had arrived back on the mainland to find that the world had been destroyed, overrun, by the drekka horde. Somehow they had gotten out from the island, or others had hatched. Weeks or months later, he had read from old newspapers how the sunlight was to blame for them breeding so quickly, and he could believe it – on the island there was only muted light due to the thick ice ceiling.

Plus in the wide world, there were no predators for any young drekka, and added to that Anne had believed that the iridium or some other strange radiation had created some sort of effect on the eggs to keep them in a form of suspended animation.

He should try and obtain a sample of the iridium-infused soil and bring it back. But then he asked himself why? The world had already passed a tipping point, and now, who would he bring the sample back to? Where were the scientists? If there were still some alive, where were they hiding and how could he ever find them?

He sighed, slumped in his chair, crushed his eyes shut and groaned. He let those complexities slip away and conjured the image of Yrsa again.

He smiled as he remembered her hair twisted with animal bones, colored string, and flowers. He remembered the scent of crushed berries she wore as perfume. And he remembered her magnificent body that she had given to him time and time again.

"Stop..." he said aloud, and opened his eyes to blink, and then had to wipe his cheeks as the tears ran down. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You chose your path, fool."

But the bloom of hope grew in his chest. He was heading home. To her home. And come hell or high water, he would find her, and if he had to fight for her, he would. Nothing on this Earth would tear him from her ever again.

That was his plan. Find Lemuria. Find Yrsa. The others would just need to keep up.

Troy stood on deck and hugged the blanket around his huge shoulders and stared into the distance. He had stopped his tiny fleet as just ahead was a wall of mist, looking like a physical barrier, and rising into the atmosphere.

From now on, they needed to stay close to each other and he would rope the boats together and then only move at a few knots. The warming season was upon them so Odin's Gate should be open, and that meant a near tropical stream would be pouring forth so he didn't expect to run into any icebergs. But if they drifted too far apart they would be lost.

He would lead them and sail directly in toward the coast which he expected to be only around five miles from them. When he found the ice wall, he would strike north along its front. He would continue on that path for a day. That would take them fifty miles north.

If they found nothing, then he would turn back, and travel south for two days, to recross the water he had travelled, and then do a day extra to go beyond that.

And if he still didn't find it? He sighed. Then he would continue north for three days. He had no choice. They were committed now and there was no going back. He either found the rift in the ice wall, or he didn't.

Once he had given his instructions to the crews and tied the boats together in a line, he led them in through the mist.

They crept forward and once inside the heavy fog it became gloomy, and they had their lanterns lit on their bows. It also didn't take long for the mist to dampen down all sound and all they heard was the slight splash of water as their bows cut the glass smooth surface.

He inhaled, only smelling salt air and the odors of his boat. Though a small part of him feared never finding the opening in the ice, a greater part was elated that he was here after all these years.

"Nearly Yrsa, nearly with you," he whispered into the foggy air.

They sailed on for ten hours, and then the light started to fail. He wouldn't sail them in the dark, so drew all the boats in together, and had the largest drop its anchor. The wind had been near non-existent, and they weren't making good time anyway.

He needed rest. He had been concentrating so hard on the massive ice wall, because they needed to be close to find the rift crevice in the heavy fog, he had to look out for ice calving that could swamp them, and also for anything large that might have escaped from Lemuria and was looking for a quick meal.

Bringing the boats closer together also meant the people could move from boat to boat, and it didn't take long before Ollie, Agnetha and Oder paid him a visit.

"How are the supplies?" Troy sat down, already guessing the answer.

Agnetha bobbed her head. "Enough food and water for another few days yet. A little longer if we ration it." She sighed. "We'll need to make a call on continuing our search or returning home. Otherwise, before we make it back, we'll be drinking urine and eating shoe leather."

"Yuck." Ollie frowned up at Agnetha.

Troy nodded. "If it comes to that, you can take my supplies." He shook his head slowly. "But I am not going back. I will continue to

search, until..." He shrugged. "Until I find what I'm looking for."

"Yrsa." Ollie turned to the two older villagers. "He's looking for Yrsa."

"Yes, we know." Oder smiled.

"We can talk about it tomorrow," Troy said. "We're all tired now."

"Yes," Oder said. "Tomorrow we can decide after a good night's rest. If we do decide to return, I hope you will come with us, Troyson Strom. You are a good man."

"No." Troy shook his head. "I won't go back." He looked up at the pair with a crooked smile. "And I'm not a good man."

There was nothing more to be said and the trio left for their individual boats. Ollie stayed a little longer and sat close by, winding a rope around his hand and forearm.

"I'm not going back either," he said while focusing on the rope.

"Good," Troy said. "Because if I run out of food I'm betting you will taste better than eating shoe leather."

Ollie's head jerked up, eyes wide. But then his face broke into a wide grin. "You'd have to catch me first."

Troy laughed and stood. "Go back to your boat now. We need rest, and then we will make our decision tomorrow morning."

The boy nodded and stood and went to where the railings of the next boat was tied off. He climbed up and over the railing and stood watching Troy as he went below deck.

Troy knew he would search for the rift until he died. And if the villagers went back, all the better for them, and him, as they would be a burden. The hidden island of Lemuria was no place for tiny humans. He had seen that himself.

He lay down on the floor in his cabin as he was far too large for the bunk bed. In minutes the gentle bobbing of the boat lulled him off to sleep, with images of red rubies, monstrous dragons, rivers filled with serpents, and trees crowded with flying undertakers, all tormenting him throughout the night.

The next morning Troy climbed the steps to the deck and saw the shape of a small body sleeping under a canvas sheet. He smiled and shook his head. It seemed whatever was going to happen, Ollie had decided he was going to stow away and come with him.

The wind had turned around and was coming from the northwest now, and Troy inhaled deeply. His brows came together slightly, and he walked to the railing and inhaled again, deeper and longer this time – *there, yes*, he smelled it – *land*.

Troy rushed downstairs and climbed back up holding his binoculars. The sun hadn't quite come up yet, and the mist was still too thick for him to see anything.

He slowly sat to become motionless as he watched. But as the sun came up and he could catch glimpses through the billowing fog there was still nothing but an ice wall stretching before and after him.

He stood, spat on his hand, wiped it against his leg, and held it up. He noted which way the wind was coming from – still to the north.

He inhaled again. “Not yet, but not far. But you *are* there, aren’t you?”

“Who’s there?” Ollie had roused himself.

Troy turned. “What’s this; a stowaway?”

“We fell asleep.” His mouth turned down and he shrugged as if that was enough of an answer.

“We?” Troy’s brows came together as the canvas sheet moved some more.

His cousin, Anna, stood up, her hands scrunching the front of her oversized AC/DC t-shirt in front of her. She was still like a ghost as she never spoke and though half a head taller, and probably about twelve years old to Ollie’s eight, she seemed haunted and lost.

“My cousin, Anna.” He thumbed at her and then shrugged. “She gets scared if I’m not around.”

Troy continued to look at the girl who just stared out at the horizon.

“And she doesn’t speak, ever?” he asked.

Ollie bobbed his head. “Sometimes, but, not really. She stopped when the dragons killed her parents. My auntie and uncle, Frida and David.”

The girl’s eyes slid to him as he mentioned their names.

“I understand,” Troy said. “Okay then, stowaways, I have a job for you. Rouse the others. We’re leaving in the next thirty minutes – north – I think we’re close.”

Ollie’s eyebrows shot up. “Close to Lemuria?” He nodded rapidly. “You bet, Captain.” He scampered over the railing, yelling as he went.

They sailed on, still only at a little over three knots. But Troy could feel the greater warmth coming up from the water – the tropical highway was beckoning them.

In another twenty minutes he felt his heart thump in his chest as the huge crack in the ice wall revealed itself and he stopped the boats just outside of it. Part of him felt like he was home already. But he knew he had a long way to go, to navigate the dangers of the island before he found Yrsa’s village.

He’d spent two years keeping his head down while the dragon horde washed over the land. Then had fended off marauders, sailed across an icy ocean and through the sea of mist to find the entrance to Odin’s Gate. It had been a trial, but still, he knew that the hard part

was yet to be done.

“And so we begin,” he said softly.

Troy brought the boats together again and gathered the adults and elder children together to give them a last briefing before they entered.

He had a harpoon, his sword, and his bow and arrow. Amongst the villagers there were a few pitchforks, machetes, and axes, plus various knives. Their tallest man didn't even come to his shoulder. He knew he stood close to eight feet tall, at least a foot shorter than the biggest Fjall clan warriors, but he knew their best hope was to stay low and stay quiet. If it came to a fight, it would be up to him, and if anything happened to him, then they would probably all be killed within a few days.

“What can we expect?” Oder asked. “When we first enter.”

Troy looked toward the massive crack in the ice wall running from the waterline to where it vanished in the heavy mist above them. “We pass through the walls of ice, and hopefully no falling ice boulders crush us. So there needs to be silence from everyone...” He gave the younger members a hard look. “Then we enter Odin's Gate, a tunnel carved into the rock that leads to a cavern that we can navigate through to enter a primordial place beneath Greenland's ice and snow.

“There is an island in there, big, surrounded by a small sea, like a moat. It has been walled off since the dawn of time, and things live there that became long extinct in the wider world.”

“Like the dragons?” Agnetha asked.

“Yes, and they can escape from time to time.” Troy looked at each of them. “In our history, there have been sightings of sea monsters, flying monsters, and things in jungles that I believe were escaped denizens of this place.”

“The source of all our myths and legends,” Oder added.

“What are our chances?” Agnetha asked with a stony expression.

Troy briefly glanced at the ice rift before turning back to the group. “I won't lie to you. Some of us will die. Maybe a lot of us. This is a savage world. Our best hope is to find the Vikings and try and live with their clan.” He half smiled. “If they're still there. And if there hasn't been a leadership change.”

“And if there has?” a young man asked.

Troy looked to him and gave a half smile. “Then I just don't know.”

“Not very encouraging,” Oder replied softly.

“I warned you,” Troy sighed. “Listen up; let's just focus on the here and now. When we make it to the beach, we'll need to quickly grab all our belongings, and head inland. There are theropods, carnivores, much bigger and faster than me, that come down to the shoreline to

hunt. Last time we had guns. This time we don't."

"We'll be ready," Agnetha said in a tone of warning to the group.
"When do we begin?"

Troy smiled. "Now."

CHAPTER 13

Vigar rushed to Jurgan. "They've stopped. Look."

Jurgan grabbed the man's wrist to keep it still and looked down at the small screen. "Yes, good, and only a few miles ahead of us." He looked up. "I can't see a thing in this mist. We'll have to follow them in and hope we don't sail right over the top of them."

The marauder leader continued to look out into the mist. "What could be in there other than ice and snow?"

"Perhaps they detected us and are trying to hide from us," Vigar suggested.

"No." Jurgan shook his head. "We think there's nothing here but ice and death. But they do not." He turned to look back at the other boats behind them. "Keep them in tight and within sight of each other. We don't want to lose anyone."

Jurgan inhaled deeply through his nose. "Salt air, brine."

Vigar frowned. "We are at sea."

"Yes, but I shouldn't be able to smell it in this cold." He inhaled again. "There is something else. In ice waters and air, smells are locked away. But here they are not. Why?"

Jurgan walked to the railing, searched for a bucket, found one, and quickly tied a rope to it and tossed it over the side. He hauled it back in and dipped a hand into it.

"Just as I thought; it's warm."

He emptied the water back over the side and looked up to smirk cruelly in at the walls of mist. "There's somewhere warm in there, and that big bastard knew about it." He nodded to his helmsman and held out an arm pointed directly ahead into the mist.

"Three knots, steady as she goes."

Troy's feelings moved from the excitement of being home, to the trepidation of what he knew lay ahead. But none of that mattered, as he would have crossed the River Styx and all the lands of Hell to be here.

He turned. "Ready?"

In the dead silence his voice carried over the water, and he immediately got confirmation back from the other boats.

They had already dropped sails and lay their masts flat. There was no breeze to capture anyway, and the roof over Odin's Gate was low.

They would line their boats and, standing, use oars to slowly drag

their boats forward. It would be slow, but it should get them through the ice rift, and then through the gate with minimal noise.

Troy began to row his boat and was first into the ice rift. He could feel the warmth of the water being challenged by the waves of cold coming from the ice wall, and he saw water running down their sides.

In between the cleft there was sound now – the creaks and pops of thick ice as it melted and adjusted. He heard several splashes as small chunks fell away, and he prayed nothing big fell to hit the boats or crush one of the people.

“Steady,” he whispered over his shoulder as he used his oar gondolier-like, and also to keep his boat away from the ice wall.

It took them fifteen minutes to come to the large pond-like area, and he didn’t waste any time crossing it to make it to the opening of the cave.

He looked back at the boats, judging their size. He could see one of the two might just fit, but the other, a large seventy-five-foot schooner-type vessel would not.

He rowed up to the largest boat. “Drop anchor. You won’t fit. So everyone is going to have to move with their belongings to my boat and the other boat. Quickly now,” he urged.

After a moment of indecision, and a forceful word or two from Agnetha, the group sprang into action, and in ten more minutes the largest boat was safely anchored just outside of Odin’s Gate and the people distributed evenly on the other two vessels, with Troy’s own also carrying Agnetha, Oder, and a very determined Ollie.

Troy rowed slowly to the cave mouth, and all his passengers stared in awe. He looked up at the perhaps ten thousand year old runes carved above the opening. He remembered when he first came to Lemuria, he struggled to understand it. But now he could read it easily.

“*All who enter the dragon’s lair,*” he said softly, “*belong to the dragon.*”

“An ominous thought,” Agnetha replied.

“Wow.” Ollie grinned.

“Here we go.” Troy turned to wave his arm at the other boats, and then he took them in.

Troy had warned them all to silence. He lit a lantern, and paddled slowly and quietly, and was thankful those behind followed his example.

It took another ten minutes before the silvery light ahead grew bright enough for them to put out their lights and allow it to guide them.

And then.

“Oh my god,” Oder whispered reverently.

“Lemuria,” Troy breathed.

After two years, he still felt the awe and butterfly feeling in his stomach at seeing the hidden, mysterious island.

Behind them the other boat slowed and he heard the whispers from it fall away to tomb silence as they all stared at what lay ahead of them.

“How can this be?” Agnetha said.

Before them was a thick rainforest under a frozen continent. And not just an ordinary forest, but huge, overgrown with massive pad-like fronds and trees that reached up into the sky.

“It’s a jungle but it’s... so white,” Oder said. “Is it cloud or mist up there?”

“There’s mist here due to the suspended moisture in the air. But it’s an ice ceiling above us, allowing a diffused light to enter without Greenland’s bitter cold. It’s hundreds of feet thick.” Troy turned. “It’s been here for maybe a hundred million years and it’s how the land remains hidden.” He smiled. “It’s like a giant greenhouse. Except one big enough to cover an entire island.”

Troy leaned on the railing, inhaling the scents of the land. “My friend deduced that there was probably a big meteorite strike here; it’s why there’s so much iridium in the soil.” He turned. “We also thought that maybe the dragon eggs came here in that astral body. Somehow hitched a ride.”

He looked up. “All that time ago, the land and sea here became populated by prehistoric creatures of that time, and the warmth from below kept the land unfrozen, even while overhead an icecap was forming over the island during one of the first primeval ice ages.”

The older man, Oder, had a hundred questions, and being a biologist, his enthusiasm and interest was like that of a teenager. Understandable, Troy thought, as it’s not often you visit a hidden mysterious island of legend, and find it’s not only real, but more fantastic than you could have ever imagined.

Troy wasted no more time on reverie, and guided them in. His boat, the smallest, could be brought all the way up onto the shore and he leapt off and using his huge frame dragged it further up the beach.

He turned to lift Agnetha and then Ollie and Anna onto the sand. Oder, to his credit, leapt out, and waded in.

The other boats needed to drop anchor and they used the rafts to make a few trips to bring people and belongings.

Troy quickly grabbed up his weapons, put the sword in a side scabbard now, and his bow and arrows over his back. He carried the harpoon.

He quickly looked up and down the beach, checking for predators, and so far all was clear. But he saw just fifty feet from them, the prints

of a theropod that had obviously come down to see if anything interesting had washed in, and it had been a big one.

There was a splash from behind him and he spun to see one of the young men had jumped off the boat and decided to swim in. The young blonde-headed man, grinned as he came to the surface, and then languidly swam in backstroke style so he could look up at the last few people waiting to be ferried in and tried to encourage more to leap in with him.

“Hey.” Troy pointed at the young man. “Get the fuck out of there, now!”

He walked into the water, grabbed the youth by the front of his shirt and lifted him one handed, bringing his face close to his own.

“There are creatures in there that make great white sharks seem like goldfish. You understand?”

The young man gulped and nodded.

“Be smarter. Or die.” Troy put him down.

Troy turned to the group on the sand who were watching him with pale faces. He knew they’d need to move quickly as they were exposed here. He looked at the huddled people – so many young children, he thought. His spirits sank as he knew he might not be able to protect them all.

He faced the jungle then, and as he did he felt the first wave of wracking pain pass over his entire body. He gritted his teeth, waiting for it to pass and after about a full minute it gradually ebbed from his chest and back, out through his limbs and to his skull.

What the hell was that? he wondered.

“Are you okay?” Agnetha asked. “You went a deathly color for a moment.”

“Yeah, yeah, just...” he shook his head. “I’m fine now.”

Troy looked along the beach getting his bearings. Nothing had changed. He snorted softly; why would it? The place had remained unchanged for a hundred million years, so two years wasn’t even a blip for Lemuria.

He knew he’d need to travel along the coast until they passed the bones of the dead leviathan, and then came to the wreck of the Viking ship. From there they’d head inland to pick up the trail. It would take them two days to traverse the jungle, cross a river, and then head up into the highlands to find the Fjall village. And that would only be if they didn’t run into any trouble.

“Should we stand a guard on the boats?” Oder asked.

Troy turned to look at the boats for a moment and then shook his head. “No. We may never come back for them.” He went to turn away but then paused. “Or maybe we will if we have something we can take back home to stop the dragons.”

“So, we should?” Oder asked.

“No, anyone we leave here will probably be attacked by something from the jungle. Or water. This is a dangerous place.” He turned back to the wall of green before him, and looked along the heavy dripping fronds, palm leaves forty feet around, and hairy tree trunks, and all with the eerie mist curling through them. “And right now, we need to get moving.”

Without another word, he led them along the beach. Many times they bunched up behind him with different people behind him asking questions, and Troy continually shutting them down.

He had to stop once and promise that when they found a suitable camp site, he would answer all their questions. And warn them all to silence.

It took them several hours, and thankfully without seeing another living creature he found the pathway that led to the island’s interior. He stood looking into it for several minutes, and then turned back.

“This is where it gets dangerous. There are things that live in here that stand two, three times as tall as I do, and eat meat. Their camouflage is so good, they can be next to you and near invisible. All we have is our brains, and an ability to stay quiet.”

He went to head off but paused. “Does anyone need to relieve themselves?”

A few of the younger ones raised a hand. Then a few of the older ones.

“Good. Do it here, close by. Dig a little hole and go in that. And then bury it. Deeper the better.” He lowered his voice. “Everyone take someone with them as a lookout and stay close. Go.”

He saw Ollie and Anna take off together, and thankfully it only took them a few more minutes for them to all be back in front of him. At least he guessed. He had never done a headcount and didn’t want to be responsible for that. They needed to guard themselves,

“Everyone, pick a partner,” Troy said. “Look at them; you are now responsible for them. Don’t let them wander off, okay?”

They did as asked, from the elders right down to the kids. While waiting, Oder came and stood next to him.

“I studied some paleontology at university. You said there were theropods here. What sort?”

Troy looked down at the older man. “T-Rex, carnosaur, raptors, a variety of smaller meat-eaters. Plus a dragon the size of a mountain.” He scoffed softly. “And that’s just on land. In the water, you’ve got mosasaur, weird looking sharks, and giant octopus, which you’ve already met.”

“Oh, okay.” Oder nodded. “Yeah, we’ll need to be really quiet, all the time.”

Troy grinned, and then the strange wracking pain washed over him again. He threw out an arm and held Oder's shoulder as he doubled over, and the old man was barely able to hold him up.

"What is it?" Oder asked.

Troy felt the pain leave him, but his knees, elbows, shoulders, and spine continued to ache. "I don't know. Ever since I got back... pain, in my muscles and bones. It comes and goes."

"Please don't die," Oder said. "You will be the difference between us living and dying in this place."

Troy half smiled. "Believe me, I have no intention of coming all this way, and dropping dead once I get here." He straightened, feeling the pain leak away. "That's better." He exhaled. "Ready?"

"We are." Oder nodded. "Lead on."

CHAPTER 14

“I don’t fucking believe it.” Jurgan shook his head. “I’m seeing it, but I still don’t believe it.”

They had crowded all the marauders onto two boats and left the others outside the cave next to the villager’s boat. And now he stared at what was beyond the sandy shoreline.

“It’s a fucking jungle. Hidden under Greenland.” He threw an arm around Vigor’s neck. “And it’s all fucking ours.”

They sailed in closer, dropped anchor and the two overcrowded boats disgorged the forty-eight marauders, mostly men, but mixed in amongst them some just as tough, hard-bitten women.

Jurgan ordered several of them to stay behind to guard the boats, and also watch the villagers’ vessels to ensure they didn’t come back for them.

They were unpacking supplies when Jurgan saw Vigor approaching.

“What is it?”

“The giant knew about this place. It must be where he is from,” Vigor said.

Jurgan nodded. “Yes, so we must assume there will be more like him here. Could be a problem.” He turned to another of his main fighters. “Asgar, break out the guns. All of them. We may finally need them.”

CHAPTER 15

Yrsa looked up towards the cavern ceiling but couldn't see it anymore. There was no light up there, and it was a hundred times over her head. In addition, the walls were steep and narrowed towards the ceiling, so climbing would be difficult. Or impossible.

Their few torches still burned, and there was some bioluminescent fungus growing from the walls, but the light it gave off was muted, shadowy, and made everything look a ghostly green.

The warriors sat quietly, and she knew they were still strong. But if they stayed in here for many days, they would weaken.

"And then they will come," Yrsa whispered.

She turned toward the wall that had been closed in. Right now they were in a dead end, but out there would be passageways leading to the surface. They had strength, courage, and fire – not a lot against an army of morwi, but she needed to know what was possible. She needed to see.

She stood and walked to the wall. Her band of warriors watched her, and when she arrived she placed a hand against the hard resin-like surface, feeling it. Then she leaned forward and put her ear to it. She heard nothing.

Yrsa straightened. "Loki, Egil, make a hole."

The two men sprang to their feet enthusiastically and drew their battle axes from over their shoulders.

Yrsa knew that the sound would undoubtedly attract the morwi, and they might come pouring through any hole they made. But she knew that it would be a matter of fight now or fight later. And later they'd all be a lot weaker from hunger and thirst.

"Always be the one to choose your time of battle," her father, Skarde had said to her once. "Never let your enemies choose it for you."

She thumped the wall with her fist, "Here," and stepped out of the way.

The two men took turns swinging their huge axes at the resin-like barrier. Bits exploded away, and gradually an indent formed, then a crater, and then they punched through a fist-sized hole, with the last blow of Loki's axe causing a chunk to fly inwards.

The wall turned out to be a foot thick and Yrsa halted the men and strode forward. She peered in, but then called for one of the torches to be held closer.

She thought she saw movement in the combined light of her torch and the glowing fungus, but it might have just been the flickering of the flames.

She stepped back. "Widen it," she said, and then: "Be ready."

The towering Vikings formed a half ring around her and held their weapons tight as Loki and Egil slammed away at the stone-like resin of the wall.

From time to time the men would stop and reach forward with their gloved hands to pull out any fibrous bits that were resisting their blades due to it stretching and bending, and just as they had the hole about a foot and a half wide, Egil reached out to grab another bit of the sticky substance to work it free.

Faster than the man could react, a huge pair of mandibles grabbed his wrist, locking on to the heavy leather of his protective suit, and tugged.

Whatever was there was much bigger than one of the smaller morwi, as the huge man was yanked forward.

Loki immediately grabbed his friend's shoulders to try and pull him back and the other men rushed forward to help.

Yrsa's eyes went wide as she felt utterly helpless as Egil screamed. She didn't understand as the man still wore his toughened suit, but Egil then screamed louder with the sound this time loaded with absolute pain.

"My arm, my arm, my ar-rrrm," he yelled over and over until his shouts became sobs. And then he slumped as he blacked out.

"He's coming," Loki shouted.

"Be ready," Yrsa shouted, expecting whatever had hold of him to follow him through.

Egil was dragged out, the tough suit was shredded and from the bicep down there was just a pink bone, that ended at the elbow. Blood spurted, and the men rushed to tie off the ragged stump.

Yrsa ran to the wall, standing with sword ready, and held up a burning torch. Inside, she saw the horrifying spiked and bristled head of the queen, massive eyes fixed on her, and between its huge mandibles Egil's arm rapidly vanishing into its mouth with a crunch of bone. Yrsa bet if it could smile it would have.

As she watched, the hole in the wall began to knit closed as the smaller worker morwi once again piled on the resin mix.

Yrsa raised her sword. "We need to..."

The men had crowded around Loki, and she saw the wound in the wall had been totally closed over. She lowered her sword and walked a few paces toward the center of the huge chamber.

She shut her mouth and looked up. Maybe they could climb to the top. If they broke through there, they didn't need to navigate the

labyrinths as they were already outside.

She continued to chart a path – there were few handholds, but perhaps they could cut grooves into the wall and use those as well. Swinging a sword or axes at the super hard resin mix would be difficult while clinging there.

She snorted softly. Not just difficult, but impossible.

She sat heavily, with her back against the wall. This is not how I will end, she promised herself.

Yrsa shut her eyes and began to pray to Odin. As soon as she did other faces floated in her mind – tiny Stromson. And then the smiling face of Troyson.

“I will see you both again.” She breathed. “In this world or in Odin’s Great Hall.”

CHAPTER 16

Troy was reminded of how the sun went down in Lemuria as the silvery jungle began to slowly darken as if someone was turning a dimmer down.

They continued on a little more until he found a huge tree with the ends of its lowest branches nearly touching the ground. Taking the group in underneath them they found a large clear and dry area surrounding the fifty foot tree trunk.

Troy looked upwards. He bet his undertaker friends were up there, but he doubted they'd try and get this close to the ground. There'd also be other arboreal hunters they'd need to look out for.

Troy knew he needed to hunt, and best to do it now at what passed for twilight before the nocturnal predators came out.

He had a few of the young men gather wood and dig a pit. It would be lit when he returned. And if he didn't return, well, then they would need to make their own decisions from then on.

It took Troy an hour before he came to a small herd of things like scaly pigs with beaks. He didn't waste time, and sprinted in hard, raised the harpoon, and pinned one to the ground. The others screamed off into the night, and he quickly dragged his harpoon out, and rubbed dirt into the lethal wound to stop it bleeding and leaving a blood trail back to their camp.

He was soon back and had the fire in the deep pit lit. He butchered the animal and was happy to see none amongst the group were squeamish. Many of the young men asked to go on a hunt next time, which was encouraging. They had a lot to learn, and Troy was keen to teach them – hunting, and therefore eating, meant survival. And he didn't want the group wholly relying on him day in, day out.

The meat was prepared, wrapped in leaves and placed on the coals. More leaves were laid over the top and more hot coals placed in the pit on top of the meat. Then dirt was piled into the pit. It would cook slowly, but the odors would be contained and not leak out into the jungle.

While they ate he noticed Oder looking at something stuck to the tree trunk. Troy joined him.

"What have you found?" Troy asked.

He turned. "I think..." He looked back to the thing stuck to the trunk. "I think I've found a very primitive form of a fungus that infects insects. Cordyceps."

Troy shrugged.

"Look." Oder leaned away but held up his lantern to the tree.

Troy saw a large beetle that was about eight inches long. It had fixed itself to the trunk, but grotesquely, growing out of its back were things like long necked but small headed mushrooms.

"Yech." Troy straightened.

Oder reached into one of his pockets and pulled out an old plastic bag. He then carefully picked the long mushroom off the trunk and dropped it in the bag. He turned to grin.

"A biologist is never without a sample bag." He held up the bagged mushroom. "Cordyceps can be used to improve liver and kidney function. Plus boost energy levels."

Troy frowned. "Are they safe? I mean, look what it did to that bug."

Oder scoffed. "Forget about the science fiction. Cordyceps are safe for humans." He looked back at the bug. "But deadly to insects. They can decimate entire species if it infects them."

"Good to know." Troy felt the wave of pain hit him again.

This time he went to his knees, holding his gut and doubling over. He'd never felt such an all-consuming pain like this. Everything hurt, every bone, muscle, organ. He went to the ground and drew his knees up. He barely heard Oder call for Agnetha.

His eyes watered and the last thing he saw was little Ollie's distraught face. And then everything went black.

Troy dreamed of fire, burning rubies, and of Yrsa screaming in a dark hole. When he woke, he blinked sticky eyes, and immediately remembered the pain from before and lay still, taking stock of himself.

He had a blanket over him. Or rather the top half of him. He wiggled his fingers and toes, and found there was no pain. Until he sat up.

He groaned.

"He's awake," Ollie yelled. And yelled again like a small siren, his voice making Troy wince.

Troy got to one knee and held it there as his thumping headache and swimming vision cleared. Then he rose to his feet as he saw Oder and Agnetha coming at him, and the rest of the village group watching.

When he rose to his full height, the two older people stopped, and a few gasped. And looking around he saw his perspective was... *different*.

"What's the matter?" Troy asked.

"*Hoowee*." Ollie clapped.

"You've... you've grown," Oder said.

"What?" Troy held out his arms and looked at them, and then

turned his hands over. They looked the same.

"I mean, you were big before, but now," Oder scoffed. "You must be nine feet. Or more."

Troy reached up to a branch over his head. He remembered it was just out of reach before. Not now.

"The pains." Agnetha chuckled softly. "They were growing pains."

"They started when I got here," Troy replied. "It's the island, and why I grew in the first place. I think it's the iridium infused in the soil. Or something else." He rolled his shoulders and felt no pain at all anymore. "Yrsa told me that the island does it so you can survive – you need to be big and strong here."

"Yeah." Ollie looked up with mouth open. "When do I grow?"

Troy reached down to rub his head. "I don't know. It took Anne and I nearly two years before, we, ah, noticed any changes." He then pushed the long dark hair back off his forehead. "But this is new. I've had a second spurt. Maybe coming back with iridium already in my system kickstarted it again."

"How do you feel?" Agnetha asked.

Troy put a hand on his stomach. "I'm starving."

"I'm not surprised." Oder laughed. "That huge body and the calories it must have burned growing you overnight must have been enormous. You better eat or your stomach acid will give you ulcers."

Ollie walked around Troy, gawping. "I hope *I* get that big."

Oder shook his head as he looked up at the huge man. "I wish I had a microscope; I'd love to get a look at your blood and do some analysis on it."

"No microscopes here." Troy took off his constricting tunic and adjusted his belt so he could breathe. "That's better." He used the large fire engine red blanket that had been thrown over him as a cloak.

He looked around. "Everyone. We eat and then we leave. Staying in the one spot in the jungle puts us at risk. One hour."

Troy sought out the remains of the meat. He would take his portion that wouldn't be nearly enough. But he would hunt on the way. And for the younger villagers it was time to learn.

There was one thing that bothered him. The dream. The part where Yrsa was screaming in the darkness. It was so real it still bothered him, and he felt he needed to hurry.

He turned to the villagers. "Make it thirty minutes. Move it, everyone."

CHAPTER 17

Lignar fell all the way back to the ground with a massive *thump*, and was helped up, but his shoulder wouldn't work anymore.

Yrsa had him and another warrior scale the walls, chipping foot and handholds as they went. Each carried a glow-pouch, a small clutch of burning embers that created a light that they hung around their neck.

Yrsa sat with him as one of the men bound his arm close to his body.

"What did you see?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Same as the wall, it's like stone. We can't strike it properly and we need to work almost upside down." He grimaced as he shifted himself. "I do not think it will be possible."

She stood. "Not impossible. We just need to look at the problem differently."

She guessed it was late now, but down in the caves there was no night or day. They may have been here another six hours or sixteen. Time meant nothing in this hellish prison, she thought.

She took out her water pouch and went and crouched in front of Egil, who had his bloodied stump covered. His face was pale and wet from perspiration.

"Drink." She held it to his lips.

He nodded his thanks, sipped, and then looked about to speak. But instead he just closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

Yrsa knew what he was thinking; he wanted to be out or sitting by Odin's side. He, like all of them, did not want to die in the decrepit darkness of the morwi prison.

She stood. "We will rest for a while, then we will talk and make a new plan," she said.

Vinar joined her. "You are a good chieftain." He half smiled in the green gloom. "But we may need to prepare to meet Odin."

She scowled back at him. "If the time comes, we will fight and die like Vikings. But I am not ready to finish my days buried in the earth like a worm just yet. I will dig with my bare hands if I have to, but I will not die here."

Yrsa went and sat with her back to one of the walls and shut her eyes. She should have been feeling the despair of a hopeless situation, but for some reason she was buoyed with hope. Something had changed. Something had happened. She would see the light again; she

was sure of it.

She closed her eyes and in minutes was asleep.

She couldn't see it, but she smiled as she slept.

Yrsa came out of her beautiful dream to the sounds of some of the warriors moving about.

"Where is he?" Loki asked. He pointed at the ground. "Egil was right here, next to me."

Yrsa came fully awake and crossed to them. "What is it? Where's Egil?"

"He's gone," Loki said, and looked around, even upwards. "He's not here. Where did he go?"

There was blood on the ground where he had been resting. The man only had one arm and would not have gone far. Perhaps he was in a delirium from a fever from his wounds. Yrsa knew the chamber they were trapped in wasn't that large, and she also glanced upwards, but that was impossible as the man's missing hand would never allow him to climb a few feet, let alone scale to the rooftop's darkness.

Then she smelled it. That acrid odor.

She backed up and crossed to the wall that had sealed them in. There was a section near the ground that was shinier than the other areas.

She felt her spirits sag. "We were visited last night." She sighed. "The morwi came and took him."

"Took him?" Loki straightened, frowning. "But..." He looked to the new piece of wall. "But he was right next to me. They would have had to crawl over me to get to him."

Yrsa nodded. "And then lifted Egil gently so as not to wake him. They opened the wall, came through, took him, and then sealed it over again."

"Why?" Loki implored.

"You know why," she said.

"But why just him?" Loki demanded.

"Maybe they're rationing us." Hagar replied. "We're in a meat larder." He walked to the wall and kicked it. It was as solid as ever. "They can come in any time they want."

Yrsa walked away, looking up again. For the first time, she felt fear.

CHAPTER 18

One of the young men, Gunter, eased up beside Troy and spoke softly while keeping his eyes on the forest wall. "Uh, Troyson, um, I think we're being followed."

"I know," Troy replied. "A pack of raptors has found us." He kept staring straight ahead. "Don't look at them. While they think they haven't been seen they'll continue to track us and wait until a straggler can be easily picked off. But if they think they've been spotted, they'll charge in like a pack of sharks, thinking we may bolt."

Gunter made a small strangling noise in his throat.

Troy had ensured all able bodied people at least had spears. He was under no illusion they could actually kill anything of size, but they would keep the beasts at bay and hopefully buy them some time to form a better attack. Or escape.

He had his own weapons, and a single grenade he had taken from the marauders. But not much else. "Ease back, and ensure the others keep together and keep moving." He nodded ahead. "There's rocks up there, and caves. We'll shelter in there for a while. Easier to defend."

"Okay." Gunter's voice was a little strangled, but he slowed and spoke hurriedly and softly to the first group, and then fell back to the second to tell them as well.

Troy knew that these people had no idea what they were up against. How could they? And he also knew some wouldn't follow his rules. If they didn't, then the education they received would be ugly and fatal.

He pulled his bow from over his massive shoulder. The rocks shouldn't be far from where he remembered. He hoped.

Five-year old Salvira hummed as she pulled the petals from a small flower she had found. Her bladder had been hurting for ages, and only now she remembered she needed to go pee. Like, right now.

She looked up at her big sister, ten-year old Gemma, and grabbed her hand tugging on it. "Gemma, I need to go."

Gemma frowned down at her for a moment before understanding. "Now? Can you hold it?"

"No, I felt like I needed to go a long time ago, but now I really feel like I gotta go. I don't want to go in my dress."

"Why didn't...?" Gemma began, but then gave up and just sighed. "Okay."

Gemma lifted her head to see further up. The group was moving quite slow, and there were people behind them. She bet Salvie and her could duck into the brush and do pee and be back in the group in seconds.

She bent closer to her little sister. "Can you be really quick?"

Salvira brightened and then nodded vigorously. "Promise."

Gemma took one more look around, and at the next thick clump of fern fronds, pulled her sister inside and helped her pull her underpants down.

"Go, quickly, *now*."

Salvira did, but then frowned and stopped what she was doing. "Don't watch."

"I'm not, I'm keeping a lookout," Gemma insisted.

"Sorry. I need to do poo as well," Salvira stated.

Gemma cursed, now thinking she should have told the group as this was not going to take a few seconds after all.

The smell of poop surrounded them, and Salvira half stood. "I haven't got any..."

Gemma handed her a handkerchief, knowing what she wanted. "Use this."

Salvira took it, but then shook her head. "But it's your good one."

"*Hurry. Up*," Gemma hissed.

The snap of a twig close by spun Gemma around. But there was nothing but forest and shadows in amongst shadows. Everything was still and quiet.

She was about to look away, when her brain registered something – shapes – they weren't like plants. And they weren't there before.

She couldn't look away, and as she stared, frozen now, little Salvira stood up. "I'm finished." She held out the soiled handkerchief. "What should I do with...?"

The weird shapes exploded in at them.

Troy heard the commotion, then the group behind began to surge forward toward him.

"They've been taken, *they've been taken!*" yelled a young woman.

Troy pushed back through the group of villagers, moving them aside like a large fish parting a school of minnows. "Form a ring. Spears up and outward, like I taught you."

Giving the group this job avoided a blind panic, and the children and older folk went to the center and the older kids and adults formed a defensive ring around them with the spears held up in a wall of spikes.

Oder joined him. "Back here," he said. "Two girls are missing."

"I told them to stick together, or this would happen," Troy seethed.

“Kids,” Oder said. “They don’t listen. Or even think there’s something really dangerous.”

Troy got to the palm fronds where they had vanished, and half turned to the old man. “Stay here, keep everyone together.”

He charged in.

He saw the tracks immediately. And he also saw the blood.

There came a tiny scream from up ahead, and it refocused him. He began to run, holding his harpoon out in front.

From the theropod tracks he knew they were that pack of raptors that had been following them. Hoping for an opportunity just like this. He knew kids made mistakes. But in this place, mistakes ended up being deadly.

His long legs powered him ahead, and it didn’t take him long to catch up to the small pack. He heard ripping sounds, and accelerated, and then saw through the trees the raptor pack – they were each about seven feet tall, green and brown tiger-striped, and had tails sticking straight behind them.

He could smell the blood, and also heard the ripping, and sounds of gulping.

Troy slowed, and then stopped behind a wall of long whip-like ferns.

The four raptors were gorging themselves, and he saw the pink bloody flesh being pulled apart – two small bodies that were barely recognizable as once being children.

He sighed. There was no point attacking the creatures. And in fact, leaving them with their meal would keep them distracted so the rest could get some distance from them.

He pulled back, feeling depressed.

He warned them. And he would warn them again. And keep warning them until it sunk in – on Lemuria, this mysterious island, small mistakes could mean a horrible death.

When the raptors finished, they would follow again, so all the girls had done is buy them maybe twenty minutes. He would need to deviate from the path in a different direction. He only had a little time.

He began to jog back to the villagers.

Troy moved them quickly, and this time none straggled. They moved in silence, with the occasional sob for the lost pair of girls.

For Troy, it was education for the group. Horrible education. He warned them, and they didn’t listen. But they needed to know they weren’t in Kansas anymore.

One time a roar bellowed out from many miles away that was so loud it seemed to penetrate down to their bones. Many hunkered

down, looking one way or the other. Troy knew what it was – the island's giant drekka. The only one, and the one allowed to grow to monstrous proportions.

For now it was a long way away. He hoped it stayed there.

They trekked for most of the day, until he heard the raptor again. This time, he dropped back, forcing the group on, but guarding their rear.

It was within the next hour that they bunched up at a wall of tangled thorns, each stem was about a foot thick, and when Troy arrived, he looked one way or the other trying to decide on which was the best path.

It looked climbable and was thick and strong enough to easily support his weight. He held one of the limbs, careful of the thick thorns.

“Wait here. I need to check something out.”

He began to climb, and when he was about a hundred feet up, he saw that the vines began to bend forward as if what he was climbing wasn't a wall at all but a giant mound. And now with the silvery light streaming straight down on it, he could see through the spiked, wooden bars – it was hollow inside.

Troy put his face up close and saw that the intertwined spiked bars of the thorn canes were creating a barrier about ten feet thick, and what was beyond made him just stare in awe.

“I don't believe it,” he whispered.

He quickly climbed back down and joined the group.

“What is it? What did you see?” Agnetha asked.

“I think, something from a Viking legend,” Troy said and walked along the thorn barrier.

He crouched down, judging the angle and the size. It was doable. He rose to one knee.

“It's not a wall,” he said, “but a barrier that I think encloses something the Vikings talked about but had never seen. At least not for thousands of years. And we're going in.”

“How?” Oder asked.

“I can do it.” Ollie got down beside him, and then began to wriggle in.

Troy grabbed him and dragged him back. “Did you not learn what can happen to people who go off by themselves?”

“Oh yeah.” Ollie's face dropped. “Sorry.”

Troy turned back. “I'll go first, and if I can fit, and it's safe, then you follow right behind me.”

He judged it was going to be like one of those maze puzzles where you have to use a pencil to trace your way forward.

Looking straight at it made it look impossible for anything larger

than a house cat. Or Ollie. But if he started at an angle....

"Everyone after me. Oder, you're next. The men act as guards and go last." Troy got down on his belly and began to worm his way in.

He belly crawled left for about ten feet, then changed angles and went straight, back the other way for five feet and contorted himself around a particularly thick and thorny limb.

He travelled carefully but still felt the dagger-like thorns, each around ten inches long gouging his body, but he ignored the pain. He could have cut the thorns away, but he wanted them to remain as a deterrent to any predators.

It took him forty minutes to inch through the ten feet of thorn barrier, and when he did, he stood, rubbing the stinging scratches on his shoulders and over his left eye.

He smiled and walked several paces forward.

Oder and the rest began to pile in quickly, and the older man came and stood beside him.

"What is this place?" Oder asked.

"It's known as *Krystall vatn*," Troy replied. "It means, crystal water." He walked toward the large shimmering lake to stand on its edge and stare into it.

"The legend goes that after battles the wounded warriors would be bathed here by the Valkyries before being lifted to Odin's Great Hall in Asgard. Its waters were said to be magical."

"Magical," Oder agreed. "It looks like something from a fairytale."

"But then it became lost." Troy looked around; the huge place was like a greenhouse inside a massive cage with the vines totally surrounding it on all sides and even enclosing the roof. There was a small clearing around the outside of the lake, but then jungle up to the vines. The massive, thorned branches acted as a cage to keep things in, and also things out.

"Became lost. Or became hidden?" Oder asked.

The lake itself was probably five hundred feet long, and two hundred wide, and further out Troy saw it darkened to some depths. He'd check it out soon to ensure nothing dangerous lived in there.

The vines were probably feeding from it, and whether the water welled up from below, or from the ice ceiling melt he had no idea. But it looked magnificent.

He turned slowly, an idea forming in his mind. The place was lush, sheltered, soft and looked safe. He could see some of the trees even had fruit, and things like scaled possums stared moon-eyed at them from within their branches.

He looked back at the magnificent water, took off his tunic, cloak, and boots, stepped up and dived in.

The water was bracingly cold, but sweet to taste, and opening his

eyes it was so clear, he could see as if it was window glass. A school of rainbow-hued fish, each as long as his arm, darted in close for a look at him, and then sped away.

His cuts and abrasions from his thorn encounters immediately stopped stinging. He climbed out.

"Cold, clear, drinkable," he said. "Plenty of game here."

"And plenty of fish," Oder remarked, as he lifted his gaze. "It's like the equivalent of a Viking Garden of Eden." He turned to Troy. "And I know what you're thinking."

"You got it." Troy nodded. "The villagers will be safe here. At least for a while."

"It is probably for the best. You continue on to find your Vikings, and we can settle and gather ourselves here. We need somewhere calm like this after... the girls." He tilted his head up to Troy. "You will return I hope."

Troy smiled. "You will know, because you will be coming with me." He shrugged. "Sorry, my old friend, but I need your brains."

Oder bowed. "It will be an honor." He looked around. "And now that our villagers are safe, what happens to me I care not. When will you, we, leave?"

"Tomorrow," Troy replied. "Today, we'll get everyone organized, and we can scout to ensure it's totally safe, and we are as secret as I think it is."

Oder and Agnetha, as the village elders and leaders, got everyone organized, and within hours they began to build shelters. Troy was delighted at the skill the people had, in design, carpentry, food gathering and preparation, and he guessed this is what was needed to be able to survive so long as a small village cut off from the world. Or rather the world had cut them off.

After, he had the adults and older children form into three groups. Two of the groups would scout each side of the lake, checking there were no breaks in the vines big enough to allow in predators. And also scout for other food sources. The third group would guard the village base.

Troy slipped back into the bracing water, determined to check out the life below the surface. He waded further out and when it was about five feet deep, he drew in a huge lung-filling breath and dived under.

He swam quickly along the lake bottom, once again marveling at the clarity. There were fish everywhere of every different shape and color, some like electric rainbows that flew past him, glinting in the silvery light that filtered down through the vine bars above them.

He came up next to a large tree trunk that had fallen into the water, its underwater trunk was covered in luminous green moss, and on it

above the water was some sort of terrapin, that spotted Troy, and stayed still, probably hoping its immobility made it invisible to him.

“Don’t worry, little buddy, you’re not on the menu.”

He took another breath and kicked off again, this time heading out to the center some hundred feet from the shoreline.

He dived down with the clarity making it hard to judge the depth, but as he swam he guessed it at around fifty feet deep. Then, as he swam along the bottom he saw his first skeleton.

He almost missed it at first as it was so overgrown with moss and water plants. He swam to it and lifting the skull, saw most of the teeth were missing, and it looked like they were long gone before the old guy died.

The skeleton looked ancient, and Troy wondered if this used to be where some older Vikings found their final resting place. He let it drop and swam on.

Soon he found the cave, dark, deep, and he hovered at its mouth staring inside. There was the glint of something metallic hidden in its dark depths, but he was running out of breath, and he surfaced.

He remembered Yrsa hated the water, but most Vikings were very good swimmers and knew how to dive. Did they hide something down there? he wondered.

He sucked in more air and went down again. This time he took a chance and swam into the hole. It was around six feet wide and sharp edged. But the further he went the lighter it got. And then he saw why.

Coming close to one of the walls he saw some sort of worm clinging there and the nearer he got the more brilliant its light – it was like some sort of glow worm that was reacting to his presence. Maybe the shine was a warning to stay away – suited him, he thought. Just give me some light and we can be friends, he promised.

Then he quickly found the glint he had seen – a gold coin. He rubbed some of the scum from it and brought it closer to the wall. There was an ancient Odin symbol on one side and a dragon on the other.

He tucked the coin into his belt and kicked on and just as he was contemplating turning back he saw the cave angled upwards, and soon there was the glimmer of a surface.

Troy came up and dragged in a breath. He was still in the cave, but inside a huge air pocket, with a dry surface surrounding his pool. And there was the shine of more metal, a *lot* more metal, in fact a treasure horde.

Scattered around were chests and what must have once been baskets of all manner of golden cups, plates, necklaces, coins, and even a few jewel studded crowns. Troy knelt beside one chest and dug

out a thick gold necklace, hanging with green stones. There were ornamental shields, golden breast plates, and also weapons – magnificent jewel encrusted daggers and axes.

And then he saw the sword resting on a stand, with a golden handle and a huge, red ruby in its pommel. It was magnificent and he saw the blade was a long, unusually dark metal with silver flecks instead of it being the usual Viking bog steel. It was now more suited to Troy's size rather than the one he had been using.

Troy lifted it and took a few swipes in the air, liking the weight and balance. "You're coming with me."

He turned to smile down at the riches – to him they meant nothing now. He turned slowly and saw the wall that had been carved with ancient runic symbols and images. And before it several long chests.

He looked about and spotted a golden goblet, and then using one of the small daggers, scraped some of the glow worms into it, causing them to furiously shine. He carried it back to the alcove and held up his makeshift torch to read the story.

There were pictures of a warrior, a Viking, holding up the very flecked sword with the ruby handle that Troy was now holding.

The Viking was facing a giant drekka, and in his other hand he held three spears with glowing silver tips.

The next was one of the spears embedded in the dragon, and the monster recoiling in pain. The wounds ran with blood and putrid flesh.

"What the hell is that?" Troy breathed.

He lowered his glowing goblet and held it out to the side – further along the base of the wall was a chest of wood bound with heavy iron bands. He went to it and carefully lifted the lid whose rotted wood flaked away like paper, and the metallic bands gave off large scabs of red corrosion.

Inside, the contents were in rows and maybe fitted into slots at one time. They were spear heads and made of the same dark, silvery flecked material as the sword. Troy lifted one and sniffed it.

It was odorless and was infused with iridium that had been found around the drekka eggs to stop them hatching.

It seemed that somehow the first Vikings had managed to work it, or smelt it, and create weapons from it.

He looked again at the image of the drekka recoiling as he held the sharpened spear head. He looked at the blade of the sword, seeing the same material.

"You're a mighty weapon indeed," he whispered.

He remembered Anne had told him that the strange and rare material was used in jewelry, surgical pins and needles, and some pen tips. It was extremely hard, but long exposure to pure iridium was

dangerous. Which seemed doubly so for dragons.

“So now we have a way to defeat you.”

Troy carefully replaced the spear tip and stood. He looked around at the gold, silver, precious stones and then back to the chest at his feet. The spears were the real treasure, and perhaps a way to cleanse the home world of the dragon plague.

He secured the long sword to himself and eased back into the water, swimming in long careful strokes to the bottom of the lake and then heading up.

As he came to the surface, he felt the agonizing pain as huge jaws clamped down on his side.

He spun in the water to see the enormous, long, muscular body of the snake, trailing away some thirty feet, but now bringing itself in to try and wrap around him.

“*Shit!*” he yelled as the thick muscular body began to coil itself to wrap him up. It knocked the sword from his back to spin all the way to the bottom. Then the jaws clamped down harder, embedding the needle teeth ever deeper. He felt them grate against his rib bones.

“*Arrggh!*” It was excruciating.

He knew these creatures, and also knew they could get much bigger. Anne had called them Titanoboa, prehistoric snakes, and if anything could make it in here it would be something like this.

This one must have been a juvenile, and Troy didn’t waste time trying to pull its body from around his. He was able to grab one last breath before the snake’s weight began to take him down. He had one free arm, and the rows of backward curving needles were digging in deep to his side.

He had one arm free, but his sword was somewhere on the bottom and the creature too close for him to wield it with any force anyway. So he drew out the dagger and lined the tip up with one of the slitted eyes of the reptile.

“I’m not your dinner.” He jammed the blade in deep, right into the brain.

The snake spasmed and released him. Troy held on to the embedded dagger.

Immediately he could breathe, and the crystal water on his wounds immediately soothed them like a salve.

Troy hung on, and in seconds the huge snake hung limp in the water. He swam one armed to the bank and with effort dragged it up and out of the water.

Ollie appeared and his eyes bulged as the kid had obviously been following him.

Oder also joined him. “These creatures will be a problem for someone our size.”

"It wanted to make a meal of me." Troy dropped it. "But we'll make a meal of it." He looked around. "These things are territorial, so a snake here means that it was probably the only one. But you'll need to stay on guard."

He turned back to the water. "In the fight I dropped something." He dived, pulled a reed free from the shoreline and broke it off. It was hollow and he bent it and stuck one end in his mouth, and dived back in. He then used it as a snorkel to breathe and keep a lookout on the bottom as he swam out to where he had been attacked.

He spotted it and dived down quickly to snatch up the ornate sword and bring it back with him. He showed it to Oder and Ollie, and it was nearly as tall as the man. In the light Troy could see some water plant growths on the ruby pommel and the blade was crusted and tarnished.

"My new sword." Troy grinned.

"Magnificent," Oder said as he ran his hand along the blade, frowning as he did. "Strange metal. I have never seen the like."

"Iridium-infused, I think," Troy replied.

Oder's brows went up. "Rare. I'll take it to Alwig. He used to be a metal worker and in his spare time a swordsmith. He will be able to clean it up and put an edge back on it." Oder looked at the hilt and pommel. "This was once the sword of a king."

"Or a chieftain," Troy replied. "Yrsa might know more about it." Just saying her name gave him a pang in the chest and a feeling of impatience. "We rest tonight. But tomorrow we leave first thing."

Oder lifted the sword. "I'll make sure this is ready."

Ollie was still wide eyed at the sword, but also at the reed that Troy had dropped. He went to it and picked it up.

"You breathed through this?" He held it up.

"Yes," Troy said. "I guess you've never been snorkeling."

"Snorkeling?" The boy's forehead furrowed.

"I'll take that as a no." Troy grinned. "It allows you to stay under without popping your head up to take a breath."

Ollie nodded. "I'm going to try that."

"Hey?" Troy spun to stare at the wall of thorn. After a moment he tilted his head, concentrating. "Did you hear that?"

Oder turned. "Hear what?"

"Sounded like gunfire." Troy frowned as he tried to think what else it could be. Or who it could be.

Ollie sat cross-legged and with his arms folded on the bottom of the pond.

It was a shallow area, and the clear water allowed him to sit there, smiling, and watching the fish dart by. He had a reed in one side of his mouth and blew the expired air out of the other side.

He liked this snorkeling thing, and really, he liked everything that Troy showed him. He barely remembered his father as he was taken by the dragons when Ollie was a toddler. But he bet he was like Troy. Maybe not quite as big, but nearly.

He liked this place and felt safe here. But when he heard Troy was planning to leave he felt panicked. Maybe he'd want Ollie to go with him. Time would tell.

"Ollie? Ollie?"

Looking up through the glass-clear water he saw Anna looking for him. He liked that she had started to talk again, a few words anyway, and he smiled while continuing to hold the reed in his mouth knowing she'd never find him.

Hiding underwater was the best thing ever.

CHAPTER 19

“Cease fire, *goddamn*it,” Jurgan shouted. “We run out of ammo, we ain’t getting any more.”

The shooting stopped and in seconds more the gun smoke began to clear. And they saw they hadn’t brought down a single one of the monsters.

Their group was set upon by half a dozen creatures that stood upright, were about ten feet tall, and shimmering like they had fur or small feathers covering them.

Silence settled over the group.

A few of the men closest to Jurgan started to mutter softly.

“They took Madja and Hans,” Geir whispered.

Jurgan grunted. The attack had come without warning. Admittedly, his men had become strung out in a long line, chatting, laughing, and not paying attention. They walked into a thicket and then the trees just seemed to come alive. Turned out, most of those trees weren’t trees at all.

“Were they like little dragons?” Geir asked.

“Don’t think so,” Jurgan replied. “Something else.”

“I can’t see any bodies. Did we kill any?” the young man asked.

He only carried a club as they only had six guns and several hundred rounds of ammunition between them.

“I dunno.” Jurgan thought they probably just burned through half of that right then. He couldn’t see the creatures anymore. But then, he didn’t see them before.

He needed to know if they were still there.

“Go and look,” he said.

“What?” Geir’s eyes went as wide as silver dollars.

“Go on. We’ll cover you.” Jurgan lifted his gun and nodded forward. Geir made a guttural sound in his throat, and the other marauders chuckled and goaded him to hurry up.

The young men put one foot in front of the other and went through the trees to where they had seen the huge upright lizard things.

Geir held his club up and turned slowly but saw nothing. However, where he was the plants were really thick and the lighting was shit. He looked down and smiled. “Blood.” His grin widened. “You hit...”

Standing stock still just beside one of the trees the thing darted forward with speed that should have been beyond something of its size.

It opened the mouth in its long boxy head and the jaws clamped down between Geir's shoulder and neck.

He screamed, punching up at it, but the jaws compressed a little more and there came the sound of bones snapping and crunching.

Jurgan raised his gun to his shoulder but didn't or couldn't fire. He could only stare as the creature then shook Geir in its mouth as a wolf would do to a rabbit. Then it turned and sped away with the man slapping against the side of its body like a flag. In seconds more, it, and Geir, was gone.

"*Fuck*," Jurgan said. "This fucking island."

There was a frantic rustling sound from behind him and he spun with his gun up. But it wasn't more of the big lizard things, but a group of his men were sprinting back down the trail away from him.

"Hey, *hey*!" he lifted his gun and fired at their backs, but they kept their heads down and continued. In seconds more they were out of sight.

"*Bastards!*" he yelled. "They're fucking deserting us." He walked after them for a few paces. "You fucking cowards. I'll kill you." He lifted his rifle again, and fired uselessly, more out of frustration.

"*Fu-uuuck!*" he yelled.

Jurgan stomped around for a few seconds and then stopped to glare. "Who was it?" he demanded. "Who just deserted us?"

The men just stared at the empty trail. But one of his eldest, Oscar, turned back to him.

"It was Gemnar and his friends. Tore, Bene, Alfred, Vindar, Bose, and I think Lefen as well. Or maybe Lefen was killed by the lizards."

Jurgan seethed. Six men run away, and probably four killed. Plus Geir. Ten gone and they'd only just arrived. Plus he remembered losing Albert, who got pulled into some sort of giant spider hole and was too far down to pull out. So they left him.

Jurgan could just make out his face deep down, crying up to him, looking pale and scared to death, so, as a mercy, that was where he shot him, in the face, to save him being left in the dark with some big spider eating him from the legs up.

"Everyone come in." He called his men to him and did a quick headcount. He was down to thirty-seven, and they'd been here little more than twenty-four hours.

At this rate, they'd all be dead in under a week.

The men looked at him. Some sullenly, some with fear in their eyes.

"We're close," he lied. "We grab the villagers, we kill the giant, and we, we take the treasure."

"Treasure? What treasure?" one of the men demanded.

"The hidden treasure," Jurgan replied. "This is why they kept the island secret. There's treasure here. Has to be."

"This place is a mad house. Full of monsters," Gilfal whined.

"Two more days," Jurgan replied. "Two more days, and if we haven't found them then, we can decide what we want to do. Agreed?"

The men muttered for a moment, and then agreed. "Two more days," Gilfal warned. "Unless we are attacked again."

Gemnar and his small group of deserters sprinted madly through the cool jungle until Tore yelled for them to stop.

"We've lost them," Tore said.

The six men sucked in air and after a moment Bene turned one way then the other. "Where are we?"

"Heading back to the beach," Gemnar replied.

"I don't remember coming this way." Bose pointed. "That rock, or big tree; we never passed that." He turned back, scowling. "Have you got us lost?"

"We're heading back to the beach. We're going by a different path. I know my directions," Gemnar growled back. But then looked at each of the men. "Does anyone have one of the guns?"

They looked at each other and only Bose raised a hand. "I've got a hand gun. But there's only one bullet left. And I'm keeping it."

"Fine, you keep it," Vindar scoffed. "We're lost and have a gun with one bullet, and then we only have knives and harpoons to protect ourselves. We get attacked again, we're fucked."

"You'll be fucked if you don't shut your mouth," Gemnar warned.

The self-appointed leader looked back to where he thought the coast was. "We go this way; we'll soon find ourselves somewhere on the beach." He turned to the ragged-looking group. "We grab one of the boats and go home. Deal?"

The men grumbled but agreed.

Gemnar held out a hand. "Bose, I'll take that gun."

"The fuck you will." Bose glared.

"Give it up or piss off." Gemnar gambled; if they all revolted, he'd be the one having to piss off.

"Now." He stared, his hand out.

"Fuck it. You're a better shot than me anyway." He pulled the handgun from his belt and tossed it over for Gemnar to catch and stick down the front of his trousers.

Gemnar nodded. "Now let's get moving – quietly and quickly. I don't want to spend any more time here than we have to."

The group moved quickly, until Vindar sped up to fast walk behind Gemnar.

"I think something is following us," Vindar whispered.

"Then double time it." The men began to jog, almost falling over

each other to not be the guy at the rear.

In seconds more they burst out into a small clearing. That was already occupied.

The four huge men sat around a small fire. They rose to their feet.

“Oh, fuck no.” Gemnar just stared.

The Vikings each stood around nine feet tall. They looked enormously powerful, had axes and swords as big as Gemnar was, and they looked a little... hungry.

One of them grinned. “*Fud*,” he said.

Gemnar lifted his gun. “Stay. The fuck. Back.”

The giant Viking advanced.

“*I won’t warn you again.*” Gemnar’s hand wobbled.

“Fuck it.” Alfred turned and ran.

One of the other Vikings threw a twelve foot spear with enormous power and accuracy that went right through him and pinned him to a tree with a gurgling thump.

Gemnar’s fear reflex caused his hand to tighten, and he fired, involuntarily, their last bullet.

The bullet struck the Viking’s shoulder, who yelled in pain, but with wild eyes, and bared teeth he advanced as the small man was still holding the empty gun up. He swung a huge axe, first up and then down, that entered Gemnar’s shoulder, passed right through him, and exited at his hip.

The man fell in half with the top half still clutching the gun and his eyes blinking as though in permanent surprise.

Tore and Bose cringed in horror, and then sprinted away, fast, staying low and vanished into the foliage.

Bene, Vindar, and Lefen threw down their weapons and raised their hands and were quickly captured and ropes tied around their necks. As they were led away, Bene spoke over his shoulder. “What does *fud* mean?”

“I don’t know. But I hope it doesn’t mean what I think it means,” Vindar sobbed.

“I want to go home,” Bene, the teenager, said softly.

Tore and Bose ran hard, ducking, swerving and bullocking through the undergrowth. Neither gave a thought to the fate of their fellow marauders they left behind. And neither gave a thought to rescuing them.

Bose was first out onto the beach. “Yes.” He drew in breaths, feeling slightly sick from the exertion and adrenaline in his system. But now he just felt elated.

Tore stopped and put his hands on his knees. He dragged in deep breaths for a moment, and then straightened to take a sip from his

near empty water bottle. He wiped his brow with his tattered sleeve and looked up and down the coast – one way, there was rocks, the other way was more beach, but it was cut by a river emptying into the water. It seemed to have a few logs sunk in it but didn't seem to be moving fast.

"Which way are the boats?" he asked.

"I'm sure they're that way." Bose pointed down past the river. "Past the river."

Tore frowned. "Looks deep."

Bose walked closer to its edge and stared out at the massive cliff walls. And then further along the coast. "Yep, there's the cave we came in. See down there."

Tore looked across the strip of water to the massive walls surrounding them, and sure enough about half a mile further down was the cave. Meaning their boats should be just on the other side of the moat-like water surrounding the island.

Bose started off. "We have to cross it. Come on, let's go; I don't want those big bastards catching up to us."

The reminder of the giant Vikings jolted Tore into action and he immediately followed.

At the river's edge they started down into the tea dark water. "Must be stained by some plants somewhere, can't see shit in there." Bose looked across the forty feet or so to the other bank. They had no idea how deep it could be, but at least it wasn't surging.

He was about to look away, but then frowned and looked back. Something was different. He looked up and down the river and then it clicked. He thought he had seen logs floating in it before, but now there was nothing but brown water.

"Fuck this," Tore said and stepped into the water and paused. "Look, we cross the river, and then just around the bend I bet our boats are there waiting for us. We take all the supplies, and anything else we need, and we sail home."

"Works for me." Bose also stepped into the water.

"What about..." Tore began.

Bose scoffed. "Nah, they're dead."

Tore chuckled. "Then let's go home."

The men stepped further into the water, and Tore stared down into the brown liquid. His neck prickled and his reptilian brain screamed danger to him.

He stopped and stared at the dank, swirling surface.

As he watched, surging up like a demon rising from hell, the massive crocodilian appeared. Time stood still, and he froze solid. Its ten foot-long jaws opened and caught both men easily.

Tore was totally inside the mouth and Bose's head and shoulders

hung out, but he didn't even have time to scream, as the beast pulled back below the water.

In seconds it was over, and the brown languid river continued to flow to the sea but now with a tinge of red running through its center.

CHAPTER 20

Yrsa and the remnants of her clan warriors sat in a circle. She had her elbows resting on her knees and her head hung low.

She desperately needed to sleep, they all did, but when they dozed, the morwi came. Two more of their clan had now been taken.

And there were other horrors in this deep morwi hive – Bilog had been sleeping and a worm as thick as his leg burrowed up and attached itself to his back.

Luckily, his groans had awakened the others and they pulled him free before it had burrowed in too deep. As it was, the ormarot root salve was stopping the wound turning poisoned, but it couldn't replace the flesh and precious fluids he had lost.

Just hours ago, the wall had opened, a small portal eaten away, and the warriors leapt to their feet, with Yrsa at front, holding her sword ready.

But no morwi came through. After a moment, Yrsa crept forward, and there it was, the queen, standing right there again, huge and bloated, and just behind her two of Yrsa's snatched warriors. But they were now covered in white glistening things that had to have been eggs.

Yrsa screamed and thrust her sword into the hole. But the queen was too far back, and in seconds the hole began to close again.

The queen had just wanted to look at Yrsa and gloat. The Vikings had invaded her nest, and she was going to kill every one of them for doing so.

Yrsa knew that the hive could have overwhelmed them in minutes if it wanted to. But the queen wanted to make it last, wanted to torture them, before killing each of them one-by-one, while probably saving Yrsa till last.

Queen on queen. That's how it would be.

"Rest," she said and sat down.

But rest and wait for what? she wondered.

She, like all Vikings, wished for a death in battle, to die fighting. But they were going to be deprived of that, and instead just ground down to weakness in the dark, and then devoured.

Yrsa looked toward the cavern ceiling but could see nothing. She didn't want to die in this accursed darkness.

She fought it, but fatigue took her, and she shut her eyes.

CHAPTER 21

Early next morning, Troy was up and ready to go. Oder joined him and presented him with the sword.

He handed it up to the giant, and Troy smiled and nodded as he looked along the blade and then the hilt and pommel.

“Wow, this is fantastic work.”

“Alwig worked all night,” Oder said. “He managed to scrape all the surface corrosion away, and then used fine mesh to polish it. The hilt handle has new leather wrapped and bound around it. The ruby didn’t need polishing, just cleaning.

“One thing of interest.” Oder motioned to the blade that gleamed silver now but was run through with grey-black flecks. “You said the Viking weapons were usually made from bog steel. You were right; this is not. This is forged and rolled iron and with striations of iridium. Alwig, the swordsmith, said it was the hardest thing he had ever had to work on.” Oder smiled and he looked at it. “It is truly a formidable weapon.”

Troy held it out and then made some swings and thrusts with it. It had good weight, and balance. It was a killing blade. “It’s perfect,” he said.

Oder handed him something else. “This goes with it. I’m sure you can procure a better one, but it’ll do for now.”

It was a scabbard made from tough leather with a long strap over the back. Troy looped it over his head and shoulder.

He was going to leave behind his smaller blade but decided that what he was heading towards might necessitate two blades, so he kept the smaller one at his side, and slid the huge blade over his right shoulder into its specially-made scabbard.

He looked back down at the older man and placed one large hand on his shoulder. “Oder, this will be arduous. And we may lose... everything.” Troy stared into the old man’s eyes. “I cannot make you...”

“I’m coming,” Oder said.

He turned to wave an arm slowly over the oasis. “I could lose my life here tomorrow. But I think I will enjoy the adventure and the things I will see, very few people have ever seen, or ever will.”

“Thank you.” Troy squeezed his shoulder and then let it go. “Come, let’s say our farewells, and get going.”

Troy gathered everyone in the new village around, hugged

Agnetha, and spoke to the men, women, and older children. “You’ll need to hunt outside as there is not enough game in here. Make traps, take spears, and hunt at dawn before the sun has fully risen. Most nocturnal predators have gone, and daytime carnivores are not yet stirring.”

He pointed out at the lake. “Investigate the lake for more weapons. And be silent. Even in here. Sound and smells will bring the eaters of flesh. And I don’t want a big one trying to see if it can dig its way in here.”

Troy looked for Ollie who had been hero worshipping him since before they arrived but couldn’t find him. Agnetha said that he was upset because Troy was leaving and wasn’t coming out.

Troy chuckled, and then pulled a small dagger from his belt. It was an old Viking blade made from bog steel with a bronze handle carved with runes and symbols for luck. He handed it to her. “Give him this from me. Tell him, a warrior needs a blade. And I’ll see him again soon.”

Troy half bowed to her, and in another five minutes he and Oder were snaking their way out through the thorn canes to the mysterious island surface.

They were well off any track that Troy remembered and the first thing he did was find the tallest tree and climb to its top. A few of the leathery wing undertakers were roused by him passing, but his sheer size now made them think twice about attacking him.

When he was near the tree’s apex, he climbed out on one of the limbs as far as he could manage without it breaking and parted the leaves. To what he thought was mostly north was the tip of the mountain, called The Mother of the Sky, and the last place he had seen Yrsa.

He knew that the Viking village was about half a mile to the west of it – and that would be his destination.

He climbed down, and Oder handed him his weapons. Troy pointed. “That way; not far, maybe a day.”

The pair headed off, and for the first time, Troy wondered why the jungle was so quiet. It seemed everything that lived on the ground had taken a vacation, and he just hoped it didn’t mean the dragon was nearby.

But after his climb up the tree, he surely would have spotted its titanic body.

No, he thought, this was something else.

He led Oder onward but remained on alert. Something had changed on Lemuria.

Moving silently through the undergrowth, Ollie paused to watch

Troy scale the massive tree while Oder stayed on the ground.

He had the Viking dagger tucked in his belt and a little bit of dried fish wrapped in a leaf. It wasn't much and he was already hungry. So he ate it and tossed the leaf aside to watch the pair some more.

When Troy scaled down, and joined Oder, they headed off. And once again, Ollie followed.

The pair of massive two foot long black morwi scouts stopped their foraging and paused at the leaf with the smell of food grease on it. It also smelled of animal.

The ants, the morwi, walked in widening circles for a moment until they found two trails – the direction the animal had taken, and another one of where it had come from. The pair of ants split, one followed the animal, and the other scouted back to where its home might be.

CHAPTER 22

The Viking elders sat around a table covered in huge jugs of fermented clove-scented ale that was strong enough to knock out a Grendel.

With pleasantries finished, and clan business out of the way, the more serious tasks needed to be addressed.

Audor spoke first, addressing Aric, the council leader. "The morwi have not been stopped. The daughter of Skarde and her warriors have not been seen for seven days. We must presume they lost their battle and now sit with Odin."

Gorm grunted. "If they lost, and they were our best..." He looked up, "...then we will need to face the morwi ourselves. Or move the clan."

Audor shook his head. "We cannot fight a river. For every Fjall, there will be a hundred of them. They will eat us to the bone. We must move beyond the river to be safe."

"Safe?" Ivar slammed his jug down. "For how long? The lands beyond the river are small. And what do we do, watch the morwi eat all the animals? Then the plants, and then spend their days trying to work out how to get to us while we starve?"

"There are fish in the river," Audor replied. "This gives us time." The old man's smile was crooked. "Time enough to find an answer to the morwi, or to plan for the end of us."

The group of old wise men sat in silence for a few moments, sipping their beer, and staring at the table top.

"There is one more thing." Aric stood. "If the daughter of Skarde, Yrsa, sits with Odin, then we do not have a chieftain. The boy, Stromson, is yet too young. Our clan needs a strong leader. Now."

"Then we shall have the trials to let the gods choose one. In two days we invite the challengers to make combat for the throne."

"All who say, *Ei*?" Audor asked.

All six men agreed, meaning there was no need for a revote if there had been any dissenting votes.

"Then by Odin, it is done. Let the proclamation be known. The trials of combat for chieftain should commence in two days hence. If Yrsa does return, she has the right to challenge for her throne back."

The six men stood and raised their huge wooden mugs. "To Odin." And with that, it was done.

CHAPTER 23

Troy led Oder up into the hills. He had to go at a slow pace as his legs were nearly twice as long and many times stronger than the old man's. He even offered to carry him, but Oder flatly refused.

He wanted Oder to stay close to protect him from danger but after many hours, he was surprised to not find a single predator, and even the smallest prey animals had vanished.

They had plenty of dried meat, and Troy now knew where the fruiting trees and vines were, so they'd be fine. But the mystery of the missing animals worried him. They'd moved out. Or something else had moved in.

He estimated another day to get to the village, and the thought of it filled his heart with hope and energy. He prayed Yrsa was still there. And still remembered him.

And if she was married to someone else? a small voice enquired.

Troy kept his head down and trudged on. He had no answer to that.

One thing he knew for sure was that he couldn't stay in the village if Yrsa had a mate. The thought of seeing her loved up with another made him feel physically ill.

Focus, he demanded of himself.

And when he did, he heard the sound of something making its stealthy way behind them. It was staying just out of sight but stalking them.

"Wait here," he said to Oder.

Troy circled around, moving stealthily, and came up behind a bunch of huge fern fronds like a collection of green shields that touched the ground. He knew whatever it was hid within.

He carefully pulled his sword free, and held out an arm, then rapidly grabbed the nearest frond and pulled it away.

"Sorry!" Ollie yelled as he stood bolt upright.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Troy said and reached in to pull the boy out. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Ollie's mouth was turned down. "Sorry, sorry." He pulled a teary face back and held out the dagger. "I brought this back to you. You forgot it."

Troy took it and looked at the blade. "I gave that to you."

"Oh yeah." Ollie grinned, and then his face became serious. "I thought you might need my help."

"You're lucky to be alive, little fool." Troy sighed long and loud.

“We gotta take him back. Or at least get him close enough that he can get home.”

Troy and Oder spent the next hour backtracking to the path that led to the crystal lake. Troy then gave Ollie his sternest look.

“Go back home and be there when I return. Do you understand?” he warned.

Ollie looked at the ground and muttered something.

“Hey, this is important. You’re one of the people I rely on. I need you there to look after everyone. Can you do that?” Troy asked.

“Me?” Ollie looked up. And then nodded. “Okay.”

Troy handed him back his dagger. “When I get back, we can work on your knife skills.” He ruffled the boy’s hair.

Ollie stuck the knife in his belt and saluted. “Promise?”

Troy crossed his heart.

Ollie grinned and saluted. And then turned on his heel and headed along the path to the thorn barrier.

Troy turned to Oder. “And now, finally, let’s get on our way.”

“Kids.” Oder shook his head. “I’d rouse on him harder, but we were all like that once.”

The pair headed off again into mist laden jungle.

In another hour, Troy looked back over his shoulder and just by chance spotted the shining black body weaving through the grasses toward them.

“What is it?” Oder lifted his head.

“Shit. I don’t believe it.” He breathed. “I think it’s a morwi.”

Troy saw the morwi pick up speed and he knew how fast they could move. He also knew that the venom was powerful enough to take down a full grown Viking, so would have been deadly to a human the size of Oder.

Troy crouched and waited beside the trail, drawing and raising his sword. Then just as the giant ant was passing he brought it down across the shiny black body, cutting off its head.

The body continued on, seeming confused, and the head’s pincers opened and closed, and finally shut completely on a twig and held on.

Troy stomped his boot down on the ant’s body, stopping it from moving, but not fully crushing it.

“This is unprecedented,” Oder said and picked up the black head that was the size of an apple to examine it.

He blew air through pressed lips. “The largest ant ever known lived millions of years ago, in the United States, Wyoming, I believe. It was appropriately named *Titanomyrma* and was just under three-inches long. But this...” He held his hands wide, “must be twenty-six inches, easily.” He looked up. “What did you call it?”

“Morwi,” Troy said. “We thought we wiped out their nest. Obviously, we didn’t. And if they’re out, then we have a huge problem.”

“I’ll say. The entire island does,” Oder said. “Most ants are pack hunters and follow the orders of a huge queen who lives deep underground.”

“Just like these,” Troy replied.

“This is a scout.” Oder looked around.

“If there’s one of them there will be more.” Troy sighed. “A lot more.”

“Then we need to make ourselves invisible to them,” Oder said.

“Sounds good. How?” Troy frowned.

“May I?” he motioned to the ant’s body under Troy’s massive boot.

Troy took his foot away, and the ant rose up on its legs and ambled about aimlessly. Oder picked it up, struggling to hold it.

“Do you know that there is a species of wasp that can enter a soldier ant’s nest. It doesn’t look like an ant, and the ants don’t just ignore it, but can’t even see it.”

“But they’ve got eyes.” Troy pointed to the black bulbs on the ant’s head.

“Yes, but most species of ant have terrible eyesight. And that works in the wasp’s favor. And for us.”

He turned the ant around showing the huge needle-like stinger at the rear. He grabbed it, and worked it for a while, and then yanked it out. The stinger came out attached to a cord with a small greyish, slimy bag on the end.

“You see, ants mainly use their antenna for moving around, and another thing they rely on heavily is chemical signaling. And that’s what the wasp uses too – it secretes a pheromone that mimics the ant’s smell.”

He dropped the ant’s body and still holding the stinger in one hand used the other to squeeze the bulb. A drop of milky liquid was extruded.

“Smell.” Oder then held it up.

Troy grabbed his wrist and bent forward, sniffing.

“Phew.” He wrinkled his nose, and nodded; it was the smell of the morwi, and he remembered what Anne had told him. “Formic acid,” he said.

“Yes, the acid is there for the venom, but also the mix of chemical pheromones that the ants use to communicate, find their way home, and call each other to battle. They also use it to recognize each other as friends as they can’t really see each other clearly.” He smiled. “We cover ourselves in this, we become invisible to the, uh, morwi.”

Troy looked skeptical.

“Yes.” Oder shrugged. “If it works for the wasps, it should work for us.”

Troy half smiled. “I’ve been stung before by the morwi, I’m not sure I want to test that out right now.”

Oder nodded. “I understand.” He looked around, and grabbed a palm frond, ripped a piece off and wrapped the stinger and bag in it. “We’ll call it a break-glass option.” He tucked it into his pack.

Troy turned. “Come on. We need to move quickly. I suddenly have a bad feeling about the morwi being loose. And how long they’ve been loose.”

Ollie climbed in through the crystal lake’s thorned cage barrier. He hummed as he twirled the dagger in his hand.

He’d spend some time practicing throwing the blade at a tree before Troy got back; show him how good he was before Troy could even start his lessons.

He smiled. He liked that Troy relied on him to look after the villagers.

“Heya!” He thrust the blade out before him.

Then he tried throwing it into the soil but mistimed it and the dagger bounced away rather than sticking in.

He sighed; he still had a lot of work to do.

The morwi ant had no trouble navigating in through the twisted thorn branches, and it quickly picked up the scent of the massed biped herd inside. The smells of so much food excited it, and as it was programmed to seek out sources of food, and report back to the hive. It immediately turned, heading back to the hive while laying down a scent trail so they could find the biped herd again.

The morwi moved at top speed across the landscape and in under half a day was back at the hive. It shared what it knew through touch, chemical scents, and body movements. The huge morwi queen was pleased.

She called up a group of several hundred warriors to go and retrieve the meat, and the foraging ant led them back along its scent trail.

At the wall of thorns the trail of ants snaked their way inside, piling up just inside as they waited until all of their war party was with them. They had learned that an overwhelming massed attack, done at speed, usually resulted in the largest capture without herd members getting away.

Their job was to sting the meat animals to paralysis, and then bring them back to the nest alive. The queen relished the soft and bloody

meat, and they were rare now as the game was beginning to flee the area.

When all the ants were inside the thorn wall, they stuck together and resembled several large balls of waving antenna and shining black bodies all clinging to each other's bodies.

At a signal the entire war party split and burst apart, and quickly made their way toward the herd of bipeds.

Ollie was out in the forest practicing his dagger throwing into a tree trunk. Time and time again, the dagger bounced away, not striking correctly to sink the blade into the bark and stick there.

He cursed under his breath and walked over with slumped shoulders and picked it up, muttering to himself as he went.

Then he heard the scream. It sounded like Liza, one of the teenaged girls, and he waited a second with head cocked, listening.

Another scream, and shouts of men. Then the screams became ones of panic, and the voices alone raised the hair on his neck.

Ollie ran back to the camp, and was in time to see the villagers, his friends, dancing, running, and fighting with things the size of large puppies that clung to them. Agnetha had one stuck to the back of her neck, and her long grey hair flew out like an umbrella as she spun and batted at it with her hands, but it wouldn't come off. Then she fell down, her body jerking and jumping for a moment before she lay still.

Ollie stood with his mouth open watching as his friend, Tom Olufsen, had one on his leg and he cried large wet tears and suddenly went rigid and also fell to the ground. Others did the same, juddering and shaking there for a moment, as though they had been given an electric shock.

"Tom?" Ollie said his friend's name and strode forward, dagger up.

Troy would save them, so that's what he'd do, he thought. And then, So that's what I'll do because he was relying on me to look after the villagers.

He took a few steps, almost trance-like, and saw that a few of the people who were now sleeping began to slide along the ground as several of the giant ants carried them.

Then he spotted a familiar green AC/DC t-shirt, and at the top his cousin's long brown messed-up hair amongst the floating group. "*Anna!*" he shouted and ran to her.

But then he was seen, or smelled, or his vibrations were felt, because a group of about a dozen ants broke away and came for him.

He cupped his mouth. "*Anna, wake up.*" He backed up. "Please, wake up."

But she continued to float along the ground and out of the village.

"*No, no, no.*" Ollie shook his head and backed up some more, while

waving the dagger in front of himself.

Several of the large black ants came running across the ground toward him. They were fast and suddenly, he knew what was in store for him if he didn't get away. He turned to run.

Ollie was a fast runner, but no match for the six legged ants that were like lightning across the ground. He turned to throw his knife at them and was delighted to see it stick into the ground. But it missed all his ant pursuers.

Ollie balled his fists and put his head down to run harder. He had one chance and headed towards somewhere he thought the ants might not follow.

Just ten feet out from the water, one of the ants caught him, and gripped his legs, the sharp edged insect's legs digging in like multiple needles.

Ollie reached the bank, grabbed one of the reeds, and dived, yanking it out as he went. He sucked in a huge breath and went under the water and waited.

After a few seconds, the ant let go and floated to the surface. But it couldn't swim, and its legs moved as if trying to walk, but it went nowhere.

Ollie came carefully to the surface and saw that there were dozens of the ants on the bank watching or smelling for him.

Ollie breaststroked further down the lake, and the ants followed. He did it again and again and they followed again.

Looking out of the water, he saw his entire village of friends, moving in single file along the ground, all sliding and moving as though floating as the ants carried their comatose bodies away. Ollie didn't want to think about to where and why.

The ant who had gripped him before now floated a short distance away, and Ollie swam to it, and grabbing one leg pulled it under and held it there until it stopped moving. *That's something*, he thought, they can't swim, and can drown. In here I'm safe, but if I get out I'm going to be taken.

The ants never moved unless he did. While they could see or smell him, he knew they might wait forever.

So Ollie stuck the reed in his mouth and went under, and carefully swam away.

CHAPTER 24

The clan council had conceived a way forward for a new chieftain. There were three suitable candidates: Viskon, Lurnox, and Bromdin.

The last candidate, Bromdin, was added with caution. He was big, young, fearless, but ruthless and with a quick temper. So they knew he would force his way into the challenge whether they wanted it or not.

The trials would pit them against each other in stamina, intelligence, and combat. The winner, provided they weren't totally incapacitated from the tournament, would wear the crown of the chieftain.

But out of respect for Yrsa, and several having been friends with Skarde, her father, they would allow Yrsa the option to challenge for the leadership if she ever returned. Or if she did not want to compete she could choose to become the wife of the new chieftain.

The boy, Stromson, would be given over to the orphaned children women to be raised by the entire village, but without any special privilege and with no claim to the throne.

The group of old men and women rose, declared the decision the law, and then sent out the proclamation. The trials would begin the next day.

Bromdin grinned after reading the proclamation, and liked the immediate deference many of the clan's people showed him by being named as a chieftain contender.

He had always wanted to be chieftain, but knew if he challenged Yrsa, who was popular, the clan might turn against him. Plus, something else in his favor, her protector, the war counsellor Troyson, was now gone.

He knew he was stronger than the two other contenders, Viskon and Lurnox, but wanted to ensure a swift pathway to the crown. He was good, but he was also cunning.

That day, he went out into the forest and trapped a *sar-geitungr*, a dagger-wasp, and when Viskon wasn't looking placed it in his water pouch.

He tried not to laugh when the man swallowed. His eyes bulged in his head as wasp and throat met, and Viskon collapsed to the ground clutching his neck.

He'd survive but he would be in his sick bed recovering for many days. His challenge was over.

But Bromdin knew that Lurnox was different. The man was older than he, and smaller, but smart. Very smart. He was a good axe man, strong, and with keen vision. Plus, he was experienced in battle.

Bromdin thought he could still win the day, but he might finish with only one arm or leg. Not a great victory.

But Bromdin had an idea. One of the young women, Morag, had her eyes on him, and with a few whispers, and kisses, and promises of what might be if he became chieftain, she agreed to help him with his plan.

It was customary at the start of a challenge for both men to be given a mug of ale for a toast to Odin. All she had to do was ensure she was the one giving them their drink before the trials began.

What Lurnox wouldn't know was that the cup he would drink from would have a coating of crushed *churnig* flower inside the rim. It would be dried and had no smell or taste, but when the ale was added it would become liquid again.

The *churnig* sap from the flowers was used to put clan members to sleep for a while who had been injured and were in pain. A lot knocked you out cold. But a little just made you clumsy and blurred the vision. Lurnox would feel its effects within seconds.

It would be the perfect plan. All Morag needed to ensure was Lurnox got the right cup. And he would do the rest.

The morning of the trials the arena was cleared and the two men, the only challengers remaining, entered to the cheers of the clan. The council had a row of seats to one side of the chieftain's throne that was still vacant.

The trials would begin with axe throwing. Then a rock lifting competition, and finishing with the combat, with shields and weapons of choice. Lurnox would of course use his axe, and Bromdin his sword.

The arena maid brought a tray with two small mugs on it and a jug. Bromdin looked down at her and Morag's eyes twinkled, and she handed him a cup, and then the other to Lurnox.

Though Bromdin was slightly bigger, Lurnox was relaxed and had a confident smile that unsettled the younger man. Bromdin had won the heaviest rock lift. But Lurnox hit the target the most in the axe throwing.

Bromdin felt his nerves. Lurnox had been in mortal combat many times. Many times more than Bromdin.

Morag poured out the ale and then both men turned to the clan counsel.

"To Odin!" they both roared.

They raised their mugs and then downed the heady, brackish contents in a few gulps. They tossed the mugs back to the woman who

gave Bromdin a sly smirk as she left the arena.

Bromdin suddenly felt his confidence growing, and looked up at the council and walked a few paces toward them while Lurnox took a few practice swings with his axe.

“Clan of Fjall,” Bromdin began, and the arena quietened. Even Lurnox looked up. “The clan needs a chieftain. A young chieftain.” He turned slowly. “With the threat of the morwi at our gates, we need to be acting right now.” Now for the trap. “I say, the trial by combat should be to the death, and the winner to be chieftain this very day.” He smiled sadly. “The loser to sit at Odin’s side.”

Lurnox turned, frowning.

“What say you?” Bromdin asked.

Lurnox smiled. “I say you must be in a hurry to sit with Odin.” He grinned, showing strong white teeth, and then turned to the counsel. “I accept.”

The clan council members remained stony faced as the challengers went back to their respective long tables set up in the arena. On them, they held shields, and three weapons – axe, long sword, and mace. Bromdin took the sword and shield, and looking over his shoulder, saw Lurnox heft his largest and heaviest axe, and twirled it in his hand. Then he took a few mighty slashes in the air.

Bromdin didn’t like the look of the ease the man used the big weapon. A battle-axe had more weight, but it was more cumbersome than a sword, unless wielded by a big, strong and experienced arm. Like that belonging to Lurnox.

Come on, Bromdin prayed to the drug that must have been entering his rival’s system.

Aric, the eldest and wisest of the clan council stood with an arm raised. The arena fell to silence, and both warriors looked from the elder to each other.

Both assessed the other’s stance, weapons, and probably played battle tactics over in their minds. Lurnox had a small smile on his lips, and once again, Bromdin felt his nerves begin to squirm in his belly.

That idiot woman had made a fool of him. Or perhaps her small brain had just got it wrong. A sudden thought intruded – what if she had given him the *churnig* flower by mistake? Or worse, what if she secretly wanted him to lose and had purposely given him the drug?

He blinked, trying to see if he was drowsy at all, but he felt more hyper alert due to his surging blood.

“*Begin.*” Aric dropped his arm and the crowd roared.

Both men edged forward in a battle crouch. Lurnox swung his axe in a loop, the razor-sharp, double-headed blade made a singing sound in the air.

Bromdin leapt backwards and then banged his sword against his

shield. "Don't be scared, Lurnox. Come closer."

The men moved sideways, and after another moment, Lurnox charged, and swung his axe. Bromdin held up his shield, and his rival anticipated it, because when the axe head was deflected, Lurnox used the momentum of the bounce to bring it back around in a vertical sweep aimed at Bromdin's front leg.

And he struck, the blade cutting deep into the meat of his thigh. Bromdin roared his pain, stepped away, feeling the hot blood pour down his leg.

"Was that close enough, big fool?" Lurnox laughed, and many in the arena joined in.

Bromdin growled. He had been hit and the challenge had only just begun. It wasn't supposed to go like this. He held up his shield, but knew now the longer it went on, the more his strength would ebb away in the running blood. He only wished he had more time so he could seek out Morag and cut her throat.

Lurnox jogged back into position and started circling Bromdin. Mobility was going to be his problem now, and he knew the longer it went on, the more his chances slipped away. He needed to act quickly.

Bromdin charged, sweeping his blade in a cross left to right and then back.

Lurnox used his axe and shield, effectively blocking the blows, but then as he stepped away, he tripped. Over nothing.

He quickly regained his feet, but he frowned and blinked several times.

Something was wrong. And Bromdin knew what.

The drug in his system began to take effect, and as Bromdin watched the mighty axe's momentum got slower as if the metal suddenly got heavier, and the shield also hung lower, exposing his entire shoulder.

Bromdin pointed his sword and worked his forearm from the straps in his shield. He had a daring maneuver planned – it would either work, and the challenge would be over, or he would die.

He charged forward, and at the last moment threw his shield hard at Lurnox's knees. The five foot around wooden and steel disc spun as it went at him, and on instinct the man dropped his shield and axe to block the heavy projectile.

And that left his entire upper body exposed. Maybe if he had been fully alert and not dulled by the drug, he could have recovered from the surprise attack. But when Bromdin darted in and struck out with a straight thrust of his sword, Lurnox only had time to look up as the long bog iron blade smashed through his lips and teeth and kept going to exit the back of his neck.

The older man's eyes went wide, and Bromdin pulled the blade

free, and then with a mighty backhanded chop, completely removed his head.

Lurnox's body toppled like a tree.

Bromdin felt the exultation of success explode in his chest and he raised his arms, and turned to the Fjall elders as the crowd roared.

"I accept the honor of being chieftain. Let all here know I will rule wisely."

Counsllor Aric stood. "Great Bromdin, you have proven yourself a mighty champion and we recognize your right to be chieftain. But you shall not be crowned today. But in three days."

Aric quieted the crowd before going on.

"Know that the current chieftain swore to return, and if they do, you must accept her challenge and fight for the crown. Or accept her right to rule and step down." He smiled. "Or there is another way forward; that you join with her as your mate. Do you accept?"

Bromdin lowered his arms. "Yrsa was a great leader. But she is not returning." He then grinned lasciviously. "I accept your ruling. Because she will make a fine mate."

He roared with laughter and many in the crowd joined him. But many did not.

Bromdin did not expect the daughter of Skarde to ever come back. But he knew that it would be best if she never returned. Because she was smart, and fierce, and he didn't want to sleep with one eye open at night. So, he would ensure she never returned.

He turned and saw Morag smiling secretly to him. And he nodded to her. She had done her job well. And her reward for that was she would also need to die. No need for a loose tongue to cause him problems.

He limped toward her. But first she could tend his wounds, and then to his desire.

CHAPTER 25

“Fucking monsters,” Gilfal whispered.

Jurgan and his now down to just twenty marauders had watched the spectacle in the arena from a tall tree on a hill that looked down on the Viking combat.

“Yeah, but monsters with no guns,” Jurgan replied. “We can own this place if we want it. But remember when I said we came here for treasure? Well, look around their necks and wrists. Tell me that ain’t gold and precious jewels?”

The men did as he suggested, and they all saw the symbolic runic pieces the giants wore on leather string around necks. There were also heavy bracelets on the women, some with flashing glassine colors of red, green, blue, and some clear that sparkled like ice.

Oscar laughed softly. “Hey, maybe they have like a treasure room. We could break into it when they’re all asleep; help ourselves.”

“We could do that.” Jurgan grinned. “Or we could just steal them or take them from their dead bodies.” He began to scale down and the men followed. “Let’s make a plan, boys.”

CHAPTER 26

Oder puffed hard trying to keep up so Troy slowed just a little. "We're close," he said.

"Will they welcome us?" Oder asked.

"All depends on what has happened in the last two years. And who now leads the clan." He swallowed. "And whether they remember me."

"And if they don't?" Oder tilted his head as he walked beside the huge man.

Troy half smiled. "Me, they'll either imprison or kill. And you." He looked down. "They may eat. Unless they decide you're too grizzled and tough."

Oder chuckled. "I'm sure glad I came."

"Just up ahead here, there used to..." Troy reacted quickly and threw out an arm, stopping Oder, just as a huge slightly overweight Viking stepped out, "... be a guard." He finished.

The man stamped the hilt of his massive battle axe on the ground. "This is the land of Clan Fjall. Who goes there?"

Troy grinned. "Mighty Druuna. It is good to see you again. And to see so much of you."

The man frowned and squinted. "Troyson? Troyson, son of Strom? Is it you?"

"In the flesh." Troy held his arms wide.

The man dropped his axe and rushed forward, grabbing Troy in a bear hug. He then held Troy at arm's length and looked at his friend. "But you are as tall as I am. Taller. How?"

Troy also noticed that the huge man who he once looked up to was now a few inches shorter than he was. Troy smiled. "I have been eating well. And missing you."

"And your world? You left us to return there. Was it as you remembered it?" Druuna asked.

"No." Troy shook his head sadly. "My world is now overrun by the drekka. They escaped Lemuria somehow and became like the grains of sand on a beach and consumed us all." Troy's face dropped. "I saved a few." He motioned to Oder. "And others are hidden at the *Krystall vatn*."

"The lake is real?" Druuna's brows shot up.

"Yes, and I have much to talk about." Troy stepped closer. "Tell me of Yrsa. Is she still chieftain? Is she still, ah, alone?"

Druuna's face dropped and he stared down at the ground for a few seconds. "No. I have bad news, my friend." He slowly looked up into Troy's eyes. "Bromdin is the new chieftain. Yrsa went with a war party to kill the morwi. She never came back."

Troy felt like he had been kicked in the chest, and he staggered back a step. "What? When?"

"Seven days ago. The morwi are out and ravaging the land. The clan will need to move. Or be eaten." Druuna's thick brows came together. "Troyson, I fear that if you come to the village, you will be killed."

Troy's shoulders slumped.

"What did he say?" Oder asked, as he couldn't understand the Viking tongue. And when Troy didn't respond, he sighed. "I'm guessing that the *I might be eaten* option is looking like the outcome for me here."

Troy looked up. "No." He faced the Viking. "If she was dead I would know it. In here." He banged his chest and his eyes grew hard. "I will go and bring her home."

"She is in the land of the morwi, beyond the dark forest, in the valley of rock," Druuna said. "If you go there, you will die." He lifted his axe. "But I would fight with you, friend Troyson."

Troy reached out a hand and placed it on the big man's shoulder. "No, Druuna. This will not take force, but stealth. And your huge boots do not tread lightly."

The man frowned and grabbed his belly. "A few extra ales, but I can still be as silent as the wind."

Troy paused. "Has Bromdin yet been crowned?"

"Not yet. In three days," he replied.

"Then I will be back in two." Troy gripped Druuna's forearm, and he did the same to Troy and held on.

"Spread the word, Druuna. Quietly. Tell them Yrsa and her war counsellor will be coming."

Druuna grinned. "This will be the stuff of legends, Troyson Strom." He bowed. "I await it with pleasure, and there are many who will rejoice at seeing the daughter of Skarde return. And also you."

The big man stepped back and Troy headed off down the path with Oder following.

"What happened? I can only understand a word or two here and there," Oder said as Troy moved quickly.

"It's ancient Nordic. Very ancient. But the gist is, we go beyond the dark forest, in the valley of rock to rescue a queen." He looked down and half smiled. "And there we will confront the morwi hordes, together."

Oder frowned. "We're going to climb into a giant ant nest, that

probably contains thousands of ants, and try not to get eaten?”

“And that’s where we will be relying on your brain and bag of tricks, my friend.”

Oder scoffed. “It’s a bag of tricks, and it’s not magic but science. And I wish it was magic because I fear we might be heading to our doom.”

Troy shrugged. “Staying home you were doomed. Going to the Viking village now you are doomed. Coming with me you only *may* be doomed.” He turned. “Because there is only one pathway from here where there is life. And that is to find the lost Fjall queen.”

Oder tilted his head. “Your love. The one you have crossed oceans to return to.”

Troy didn’t respond but looked straight ahead.

He knew this was probably a suicide mission, but without Yrsa, he felt he would be already dead anyway.

CHAPTER 27

Yrsa staggered a little and struggled to hold her sword with two hands. There was just three of them remaining now. And they stood back to back.

The rest were gone, taken, and every time her eyelids drooped, she knew that there was a chance that another of their clan would be spirited away.

Their fire and oil was all gone, and they now relied on the ghostly, greenish glow of the luminous fungus growing from the walls. It was just enough to see, but left too many shadows, and the morwi were black as the night, and were swift and silent.

“I will die in battle,” Loki announced. “I will not be dragged away to be eaten by these abominations.”

Vinar agreed, although his shoulders were slumped, and he blinked weary eyes that barely remained open.

“How much longer?” Loki asked softly. “How much longer before they come for us all?”

“Hold, brave men of Fjall. Because we will see the light again,” Yrsa promised.

Both men turned to her, with questions in their eyes, but said nothing.

“Rescue is coming,” she said. “I feel it in my heart.”

Once again she mumbled a soft prayer to Odin.

CHAPTER 28

The council had promised Bromdin the crown following his win in the arena. But they heard the mutterings of the clan – the people did not like it and did not want him as their chieftain. They wanted more time given for Yrsa to return.

So, to buy time, the elders devised a set of three tasks for Bromdin to prove himself worthy of wearing the crown. He could have refused as he had already won the crown. But the young warrior knew it was best to have the clan as well as the council of elders on his side.

He was to gather a quill from a giant raptor. Then he was to gather a precious greenstone from the deep caves of Aurac. And finally he was tasked with finding the sword of Odin. A legendary blade they said could never be broken and could slay a dragon.

The elders knew that if Bromdin completed these tasks, they would have no choice but to follow his rule. Whether the clan wanted it or not.

They also knew that the last task would be an impossibility, as no one even knew if the sword was real or just legend.

Bromdin scoffed. He knew some of these tasks were made up, as how could you find something that didn't exist? The sword of Odin was myth.

Already he had found the rotting corpse of a giant raptor and plucked one of its six foot feathers from its hide. He had it now strapped to his back as he pursued the second ordeal.

In a few hours he stood before the cave opening. It was in the deepest caves that the greenstones grew. He stood staring into its depths for many long minutes, feeling the ginger hairs rise on his neck.

Finally, he urged himself forward – this should be the easy job – and he lit a small torch and held it up.

He descended over crushed rubble, and he stopped from time to time to listen. But all he could hear was the soft drip of water somewhere deep in the darkness, and the occasional skitter of little feet behind the tumbled rocks.

Bromdin held up his torch flame and turned slowly. He was looking for the telltale glint of the shining stones that looked like green ice. But so far there was a few mossy rocks shining in the darkness, or just more of the dripping cavern.

It was after another hundred feet of descending that he found a partially hidden side cave and followed it in to find a new cave so big it was like an underground world, and after descending for another thousand steps he saw a fiery glow up ahead – not green, but red.

Bromdin drew his sword, thinking it might be the glow of a camp fire and approached cautiously, because he knew that some of the other clans still harbored hatred for the Fjall.

The glow was coming from just around a bend and as he got closer, he began to feel an odd feeling in his back teeth, inside his head, and a wriggling sensation in his bones.

At the corner he stopped and peered around slowly. There was a large circular depression, and inside there were objects glowing like lumps of pure fire. They sat in a bed of silvery threaded dirt, and he straightened, his huge bushy brows coming together, as he tried to work out what they were.

They didn't seem a threat and he walked to the edge of the shallow, circular pit. The sensation inside him was making his eyes water and his stomach roil. But the things inside were like giant jewels.

He had heard the legend about the Heart of Odin that was supposed to shine like this. But he had never seen it. However, these were gemstones, and would make a fine addition to his throne. He would place one at its top and cast a fiery glow down on him as he sat before the clan. All would gaze up at him in awe.

He would take just one. For now.

Bromdin slid down into the pit. But as he neared the large pile of gems, his legs grew weaker, and his eyes became blurry.

He staggered as he suddenly found he was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open. And the warmth was comforting like a soft blanket that had been warmed beside a fire before it was draped over him.

In seconds more he had sunk down to all fours, then rolled over on his back amongst the fire-red glowing objects. He took off his sword and other weapons. His entire body tingled.

He would lie here, for just a while. He had been walking for hours, so a few minutes rest would be good for him.

Bromdin closed his eyes, and dreamed of dragons, and a sword of shining silver fleck that flashed up and down in front of him.

Bromdin opened his eyes.

He hurt.

Every inch of him was fire and agony, and there was a terrible taste in his mouth like blood and salt. And there was something else; a fury inside him that bordered on murderous.

He wasn't sure who it was directed at, maybe the elder counsel, maybe anyone who was against him rising to chieftain, or maybe the

daughter of Skarde. But he wanted to kill them all. No, not just kill them, but crush them to pulp and smash their bones to kindling.

Bromdin dragged himself to his feet and swayed for a moment. The red glow bathed his body and instead of comforting him, it stung now like being bathed in fire.

His feet hurt and looking down he saw his boots had burst open. He groaned. He needed to be home. Morag could tend to him.

He lifted his sword, and thought it seemed odd – small and too light in his hand now.

The huge Viking staggered out toward the light.

CHAPTER 29

Troy and Oder moved through the dark forest, and they had needed to hunker down once as the massive drekka passed by. Oder stared with open mouth as it crushed boulders and pushed aside huge trees as if they were twigs.

“It is like a moving mountain,” he breathed.

“Yes, because it is the only one, and may have been here since the dawn of time.” Troy watched it leave as it scoured a way through the jungle, creating a path of flattened debris. “There are no other drekka, and no other competitors for it. It is the absolute ruler here.”

“I wonder if it too is finding the missing game a problem,” Oder asked.

“If it does, then it will hunt people. And against that monster, there is no defense,” Troy replied.

“I wonder what would be worse; a rampaging dragon of that size, or a horde of your hungry morwi?” Oder asked.

“Well, here we have both.” He turned and smiled. “Lemuria is never boring.”

Oder laughed. “I’m guessing very few people here die in their beds of old age.”

The pair climbed out of the jungle and stared down into what was known as the valley of rock. And they could see why. There were less plants, the ground was stony, and had large boulder islands rising up in places as if some great creature made of stone was trying to break out through the Earth’s surface.

Troy looked down into the valley and inhaled. “Smell that?” He turned.

Oder nodded. “Yes. Formic acid. Ants. Your morwi.” He turned. “We need them. At least a few for their venom sacs to coat ourselves. And another for anyone else hiding in there. If they’re still alive.”

Troy nodded. “There will be scouts. We need to find and take them quickly, or they’ll alert the rest of the hive, and we won’t even get a chance to get close.”

“Got it,” Oder replied. “We grab them, cut their heads off and don’t get stung.”

“That’s the plan.” Troy left his hiding place, followed by Oder.

Oder paused. “And remember...”

Troy turned.

“Lemuria is never boring.” He grinned and followed Troy down into

the valley.

The drekka was starving and had taken to entering the seawaters surrounding the island to catch the large sea leviathans swimming there. It ate anything it could find, and it too smelt the acid stink of the ants.

Its anger rose as it tied the strange new smell appearing all over the island to the lack of meat.

And anger meant it would kill them if it found them.

Troy and Oder crept down through the sparse trees. The pair had used the previous poison sac from the morwi they had captured long back, but the sac was nearly dry and didn't have much fluid left inside it. However, it might just be enough to confuse the ants without making the men as invisible as they needed.

"Remember," Oder whispered. "We need to catch and kill them quickly. The ants can conjure a range of different scent combinations – friend or hive member, food, or attack. We do not want them to release an attack scent, or we'll be overrun before we take a few steps."

"Once we commit to this, there's no turning back," Troy said.

"You're right there." Oder turned. "Did you know that the speed of the fastest ant in the world has been recorded at over one hundred times its body length in a single second." He turned back to the stony ground ahead. "Or the human equivalent of a grown man running at three-hundred-and-sixty-miles per hour."

"Holy shit." Troy exhaled. "Hey, by the way, how will we know which scent is the attack one?" Troy asked.

Oder shrugged. "The attack scent might contain more formic acid, and smell more, um, acrid."

"Might?" Troy scoffed.

"I'm guessing. We just kill them quickly and hope we're not rubbing attack scent all over ourselves."

Troy laughed softly. "So, we need speed and luck."

"There." Oder spotted the first ant as it chowed down on a reed.

Troy squinted. "What's it doing? I thought ants were meat eaters."

"Nope." Oder shook his head as his mouth turned down. "They're like us, omnivorous. They mostly prefer meat or sweet things like fruit, and sap. But once all the meat is gone, they will turn to the plants to sustain them. All the plants, even the trees."

"They'll leave nothing of this island but a bare rock. Lemuria will be finished." Troy's jaws clenched.

Oder nodded. "And when all the plants and meat is gone, they'll

turn to each other as food. But you're right, even though buried seeds may sprout, there'll be no animals to rise again, as the ants will have even found all their eggs. Shame."

"Then they've got to be stopped. This time for good," Troy declared. "Let's get that scout."

Troy and Oder crept up on the insect, and when Troy was close enough he sprang out, and used his long sword to cleave the thing in two.

Oder grabbed the back half, but pointed at the front half that was beginning to walk back to the hive, its antenna twitching.

"Kill that. It can still communicate."

Troy followed it and this time, chopped it into pieces.

Oder extracted the sac containing the formic acid and pheromones and was satisfied to see it was full.

"Maybe five more, and we're ready to apply our cloak of invisibility to us and your friend," he said.

"Five?" Troy's eyebrows shot up.

"Yes, you'll see why," Oder replied.

It took them another hour to find five more ants, and they needed to retreat as the closer they got to the hive, the more chance there was they'd be detected before they were ready.

Back at the tree line on the slope, Oder wrapped two of the sacs in leaves and placed it in his small woven bag, and the other three revolting grey bags of greasy fluid, he held out in front of himself.

"Ready?" he asked.

Troy nodded. "Show me how."

"One for me, two for your bigger mass. Follow me. It's easy." Oder stood and stripped off his clothing.

He took off everything, even his socks and underwear. Troy did the same, looking like Goliath next to the pale, older man.

Oder looked at him. "Ready?" He picked up the sac. "Watch."

He pulled the sting out of the end and immediately a thick, milky liquid was extruded. He allowed some to go into his palm and rubbed them together, and then, starting with his face, hair, ears, neck, he worked it all over himself and then all the way down his body.

"Avoid your eyes," Oder said.

Troy followed him and did as asked and even then he blinked as the acrid scent made his eyes water. He used the first sac quickly, as his long hair sucked up nearly half the bag. He finished the first at his waist, and started on the second sting bag.

Troy finished himself, wincing when he covered his genitals as it stung like liquid fire. And then he found out why they needed so many – Oder told him they also needed to cover their clothing as well. And have two in reserve for whoever they found in the hives. If they found

anyone alive at all in the hives.

Troy felt a flash of anger at that suggestion but swallowed it back down. Because Oder was right. He'd seen what the morwi did to people, and he doubted it took them below ground to keep them alive. At least for long. And Yrsa had been missing over a week.

Oder looked up. "We're ready."

"Phew." Troy shook his head. "I feel like I'm covered in a light coating of bleach-smelling grape jelly."

"If it keeps us alive..." Oder shrugged.

"Worth it." Troy had his doubts about the sanity of what he was attempting and dragging the old man with him. If this went bad, they would be eaten alive.

"Oder," he said. "I don't need you down there. If you wish to stay here, as a lookout, I'd..."

"No." Oder gave him a lopsided grin. "My curiosity is far outweighing my sense of self-preservation right now." He tilted his head. "But let's not prevaricate, as my common sense will kick in eventually and I'll run screaming all the way back to the crystal lake."

Troy sucked in a breath, and he and Oder pulled out probably the last two villager flashlights in existence. He checked his, still a glow, but weak. Oder did the same. There were no more spare batteries after these went out.

"Then let's go do something stupid. Together." Troy led them toward the huge opening in the ground.

They crouched down and watched the massive, central mound, which was the main entrance to the morwi hive.

There were several smaller, six foot volcano-like structures dotted around the rocky field, but the center one, as well as being the tallest, was the widest, and more like a crater. It was an open wound in the earth with an infection inside.

At its rim, the pair of men could see warrior guard ants positioned at its top, their huge, armored heads ringing the dark hole. Troy put a finger to his lips, but Oder shook his head.

"Don't worry about that. Ants can't hear like we do. Instead they hear by feeling vibrations in the ground. Special sensors on their feet and on their knees help ants read signals from their environment." He turned. "They also use their antennae and the hairs on their body to feel around while foraging and hunting. We can whisper, but we need to tread lightly."

Troy scoffed. "Easy for you to say; I must weigh close to eight hundred pounds."

As they watched more ants appeared at the surface, just standing there with their antenna waving, and huge glossy heads with pincers

held wide.

“The guard’s job is to defend their fortress,” Oder said. “Though we hope to be invisible, the less we need to walk amongst them the better for us.”

“How do we draw them out while we slip in?” Troy said.

“The small nest openings.” Oder nodded toward them. “Throw something into them or block them. They’ll think they’re under attack and swarm toward it.”

“Okay. I’m going to do this real quick.” Troy looked around for a suitable tool, but Oder grabbed his arm.

“No, not quick. Your thumping feet will give you away. Just walk; they can’t really see or hear you, remember. But they’ll feel you. Slow and light.”

Troy nodded, took another look around, and then headed off to a pile of tumbled rock. He’d been stung by these little monsters before, and it nearly killed him, not to mention the excruciating pain he’d had to endure.

He selected a large boulder and walked back to one of the smaller mounds, when close, an ant came near and began to pat his leg with its antenna. He froze. But after a moment, it just wandered away.

He turned to nod to Oder who gave him a thumbs up.

Troy lifted the two hundred pound rock above his head, leaned over the mound, and then thumped it down on top of the hive entrance.

It obliterated the hive entrance and sunk in up to three feet. He backed up a few paces, turned away, and walked carefully back to Oder.

He crouched beside him and watched the smashed hive.

“Here we go,” Oder said and stared with wide eyes.

The smaller mound was now sealed by the rock, but from the huge central hive mound a boiling sea of black, scuttling bodies and waving antenna poured forth. They moved like a glistening river of oil toward the buried mound and swarmed over it.

“Smell that?” Oder asked.

Troy nodded. “The smell is sharp, like citric acid.”

“Yes, the attack scent. The warriors,” Oder replied. “Wait.”

It seemed like the torrent of bodies streaming from the mound would never end, and they began to pile up on one another, as they furiously worked to find and make war on whatever they believed was attacking their hive entrance. These ants had huge heads and powerful pincers and were the fighters and defenders of the colony.

After several minutes the warriors began to thin, and more workers began to appear as they had found the stone and were going to try and remove it or burrow around it.

Oder turned. "Ready?"

Troy exhaled through pressed lips. "Do or die. Literally."

Oder stood, sucked in a deep breath and then set off with Troy following. The pair walked calmly toward the entrance with the ants they encountered moving around them. At the massive crater hive they stared down into the darkness for a moment.

Oder turned to nod, and they switched on their flashlights. They began to descend, staying up against one of the walls.

The morwi exited and entered in long streams, so close to each other, it looked like they were tethered together.

"Don't break their stream," Oder said. "It's their chemical pathway."

As they dropped below the earth, it got warmer, and warmer still.

"Switch off your light," Oder whispered.

Troy stopped and did as asked. After a second a green glow infused their surroundings.

Oder chuckled and turned to grin. "It's bioluminescent fungus. We can use it to see and save our batteries."

Troy nodded and was about to continue when he paused. "What should we be actually looking for?" he asked.

"Good question," Oder replied. "I guess we'll know it when we see it."

"My friend, Anne, told me that these tunnels could go on for miles," Troy replied.

"Yes, dozens of miles, and have dozens of side chambers. Some for raising their young, for feeding rooms, food larders, and queen's chambers. We may be in here for several days." Oder half turned. "Did you think this was going to be quick?"

Troy half turned. "Well, I kinda hoped."

Oder waved him on, and they kept going down and then after about a hundred feet it levelled off. They stopped at a junction and peered into one side tunnel. This time Troy flicked on his flashlight and shone it inside.

It was a chamber filled with hundreds upon hundreds of immobile ants, and the smell was near overpowering.

"They look like they're sleeping," Troy said softly.

"They probably are. All ants sleep, some, like the fire ants take power naps for a few minutes every few hours, others can sleep for six hours, and others still, can hibernate for months. I don't know enough about this species to know how long they'll be out," he said. "But I do expect they'll take shifts, working, and eating, and sleeping."

The pair continued on, and the next chamber was an egg vault with thousands of glistening eggs stacked all around the floor and walls, and specialized ants tended to them. They turned them over,

repositioned them, continuously tapped them, and of course, guarded them.

The next vault was a feeding room, where bugs the size of cart wheels were being milked by several ants and encouraged to exude a drop of glistening fluid, which the ants lined up to drink.

Oder snorted softly. "Just like aphid farming." Oder turned. "It's like a sweet wine, a reward for hard work."

The next chamber Oder peered into made the man go red straight to make a strangled noise in his throat.

"Oh god no." He staggered back and Troy caught him.

Troy then saw what had startled the old man – piled up at one side of the feeding chamber were bodies, small bodies, and Troy recognized the long flowing gray hair of Agnetha.

"My villagers. My friends." Oder sobbed. He turned. "We have to help them."

Troy shook his head. "I don't think we can. The venom of the morwi is powerful and can stop the heart. Even for large Vikings such as me."

"I've got to try." Oder started into the cavern.

"Just..." Troy grabbed him and pulled him back. "Just wait here."

Troy shone his light around inside and saw many other creatures that had been stung and were either paralyzed or dead and just waiting to be consumed.

He eased in and the warmth and a meaty, sickly smell was near overpowering. He trusted the coating of morwi pheromones would still make him invisible as he moved past busy ants stacking the bodies, and in some cases dismembering them, and transporting away the limbs to somewhere else in the hive.

Up close he saw the huge sting welts on the people and felt a young man's neck. There was no pulse. Same for the next and the next. He found one girl, with long flowing brown hair and an oversized AC/DC t-shirt – he recognized her – Anna, Ollie's cousin. Her eyes were open. But they were like a doll's eyes, glassy and lifeless.

He turned to Oder and shook his head.

But Oder pointed and motioned for him to keep checking.

Troy checked some more of the bodies with the same result. He recognized some of them and quickly looked around for the kid, Ollie, but saw no sign of him. Maybe he had already been broken up and taken, he thought nauseatingly.

He felt ill with regret; he should have known that the morwi were on the march and would have no problem getting through the crystal lake thorn barrier. The villagers would have been trapped in there and immediately overwhelmed. He just hoped their hearts stopped quickly from the venom and none of them suffered.

He eased back onto his haunches and shook his head again.

He was slightly relieved as there was no way they could have saved the thirty or so people from the hive.

Oder nodded and Troy rejoined hm. He placed a hand on the old man's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"We should have been there for them," Oder said softly.

Troy let his hand drop. "And if we were, then our bodies would be here as well."

Oder nodded, his head down. But after a moment he looked up and where Troy expected to see him broken, he was instead furious. "I want them dead. All of them. And we still haven't found the morwi queen yet. She would have ordered the attack."

"That queen is not the one I'm looking for," Troy replied. "We finish what we started. Let's go."

And then after dropping down another twenty or so feet, they came to a large chamber on their right, and peering in, they saw the first huge body. Then more bodies.

"Jesus," Troy breathed.

They were Vikings, and many were laying with faces baring expressions of agony and terror, and planted on them, were large eggs. On one body one of the eggs had hatched and the grub-like thing wormed their way through his open ribcage like a maggot on a piece of rotted beef.

"Queen larvae," Oder said sadly. "This might be where your Vikings ended up."

"It's not all of them," Troy replied.

The pair carefully entered, and Troy looked around and saw several dark tunnels behind them, but thankfully he didn't see Yrsa's body anywhere.

"Druuna told me that she took twenty of her best warriors with her," he said. "There's not that many here."

"Some may have been eaten already," Oder advised. "Taken to the queen's private feeding chamber."

Troy grimaced as it wasn't what he wanted to hear. The thought of Yrsa being dismembered and eaten down in these dank caves made him feel like he wanted to vomit.

"The wall, there," Oder pointed. "It's new. They walled something in, and by the looks of it, recently." He turned. "Maybe to seal something in. Imprison it."

"To imprison *them*. Or store them for later." Troy walked toward it and lay his hand on it. Then placed his ear against it. He could hear nothing.

Suddenly the ground shook, and dust and grit rained down on them.

“What the hell was that?” Oder asked.

The drekka moved through the jungle like a heavy scaled juggernaut, clearing trees from its path and flattening rocks as big as houses. It followed the acrid scent of the tiny things, as it now had replaced all the other odors of food.

The small creatures were now not just an insignificant hindrance, they were competition. And competition was to be eaten or destroyed.

“I don’t know.” Troy watched the scurrying ants moving at a panicked speed around him. “But it’s driving these guys crazy, and it’s a distraction we can use.”

“Ah yes, the ground vibrations will mask our own,” Oder agreed.

Troy drew his sword and banged it against the new wall. Then harder. Chips of the resin-like material flew away, but it held.

“It’s thick,” he said. “If there’s Vikings trapped behind there, maybe it’s why they couldn’t dig their way out.”

He struck at it again and again, sinking in about ten inches. He placed his ear to the wall and listened. There was still nothing. But he couldn’t help that his spirits rose.

“Yrsa!” he yelled.

Still nothing.

He hammered now, using all his great strength and the rocks and resin started to explode away from him. He remembered he still had a single marauder grenade but didn’t want to chance using it if Yrsa was just on the other side.

“Yrsa, Yrsa.” He became furious, manic, and rained blows down on the wall until he was about eighteen inches in. Then a huge chunk flew inwards.

He quickly pressed his face to the hole.

Inside was dimly lit with the green glow with far too many shadows. But beside one of the walls he was sure there were bodies lying there.

Knowing now they were back a little from where he was digging, he pulled the metal harpoon and using both hands laid into the wall, using his entire upper body. Oder stood back and lifted an arm to cover his eyes as the giant Viking worked.

The shaking and pounding came again, and this time rocks fell around them and the ants were driven into frantic movement. But as long as they didn’t bother Troy, he stayed focused, only stopping from time to time to peer inside the hole.

He stared – one of the bodies had moved, crawling closer, he was sure of it. He lifted his rapidly weakening flashlight and shone the

beam inside. His heart jolted when he saw the long white braids twisted with bones, talisman, and precious stones. And then when he tapped the light it shone a little brighter and the face turned – that beautiful face – covered in her familiar striped war painting.

“Yrsa!” he yelled with all his breath, and she weakly raised an arm momentarily before falling back.

“Arghhhh.” He was driven mad now and struck over and over until huge chunks fell away and finally cracks began to run outward from the hole he had dug. When it was almost wide enough for him to fit, he lowered a shoulder and charged at the weakened wall with all his great size, strength, and weight.

It exploded inwards, and he stood there looking about for any sign of danger, covered in blood and abrasions. He took it all in in a blink – there were three people. Two men and Yrsa.

He rushed to her. Her lips were flaky dry from dehydration, and her skin alabaster pale.

She blinked up at him, and gently lay a hand on his chest as he cradled her.

“Am I dreaming this?”

He dragged her to him, burying his face into her neck, and tried to stop the tears flowing. “I found you, I found you.”

Oder had followed him in. “They need water, all of them.” He knelt and placed his water bottle to one of the men’s lips. “And before we take them out, they’ll also need a coating of the ant juice, or they won’t get six feet.”

The walls shook again.

“We need to hurry,” Oder yelled. “This place is going to cave in.”

Troy let Yrsa sip his water. “Slowly,” he whispered.

She leaned back, gasping, and looked up at him. “If you love something set it free. If it comes back, it is yours.” She smiled weakly. “And you came back.”

“I crossed the world to find you.” He brushed some hair from her face.

“I called to you. So many times.” Her eyes shut as she passed out.

“And I heard you.” He whispered.

“Hurry now,” Oder said.

Troy worked quickly, coating Yrsa in the ant venom and pheromones. Then he went to one of the other warriors but found him already dead.

Oder yelled from behind him. The warrior he tended to had been roused by the water, and suddenly sat up, his eyes bulging and he grabbed the old man by the wrist.

Troy held up a hand. “Hold, warrior of clan Fjall,” he said in ancient Norse. “We are friends, come to rescue you.”

"You. I know you." The man blinked, and carefully let Oder go. "Are you Troyson, son of Strom. The war counsellor?"

"I am. I have returned. And you must get on your feet, and leave with us, or you will be food for the morwi."

The Viking looked around and shook his head. "Where are all my brothers?"

"Gone. And you will not join them as today is not your day to die. What is your clan name?"

"Loki," he said and got up on wobbly legs. He used Oder as a crutch, and the old man groaned under his weight, only coming up to just past his waist.

"Vinar." He pointed at the other man.

Troy lifted Yrsa in his arms. "The Valkyries have already taken him." He turned away. "We're leaving."

Oder stepped through the hole with the huge Viking still holding onto him. Troy, right behind him holding tight to Yrsa came through and immediately froze.

There was a monster blocking their way.

"Oh no," Oder whispered. "The queen."

"Should we stay still? And be invisible," Troy said out of the side of his mouth.

"No use, she has excellent vision," Oder replied. "She sees us."

Troy looked back at the monstrosity. It was hard to even reconcile it as being the same species as the two foot long morwi, as this thing was as big as a rhino and it filled the cave.

Huge mandibles opened and closed as if breathing, and its body was covered in spikes and hairs, and on the end of each foot was a crescent-shaped set of claws that would also be used for gripping. Behind it trailed a long abdomen that was glistening black and pulsating with life, and even as she stared at them an egg was squeezed out to be quickly gathered up by a worker and taken away.

Troy then saw that between those mandibles the razor-sharp mouth parts were covered in glistening blood and viscera. She had obviously been dining well on the Vikings.

"What do we do?" Troy asked without turning away from the monstrosity.

"That's up to the queen. She either backs off. Or we have to fight," Oder replied.

Beside him, the still weakened Loki pushed himself off Oder and tried to drag his axe forward, and at first it seemed far too heavy for him to lift. But after another second or two, he managed to draw it into his hands.

He turned to Troy. "You were wrong, son of Strom. Looks like this is a good day to die." He grinned. "Thank you, Troyson, for ensuring I

did not die in the darkness.” He lifted the axe. “But instead, died in battle.”

He lifted the axe and charged the queen morwi.

The massive ant rushed to meet the challenge, and its mandibles flicked wide, and closed on the Viking’s waist. His huge axe came down on the center of its head in a mighty blow, between the weaving antenna, and glanced off the queen’s exoskeleton armored head with only a small piece of her carapace being chipped away.

Loki screamed as the pincers held him and in another moment, his waist was pierced, and his spine crushed as the pincers came together. Ragged flesh, blood, and viscera spilled out, along with the loud sound of crunching bone. Loki’s top half flopped to the side as his center was now just mush.

Troy had two options – put Yrsa down and fight, which he knew after seeing Loki would be futile. Or try and escape. Which might be just as futile as the huge morwi would surely run them down.

“Ah, Troy,” Oder called. “If you fight, Yrsa will die.”

Fight and die. Or run, and maybe live. Those were his options.

The queen began to draw the top half of Loki deeper into its mouth, staring back at them as if showing what their fate would soon be.

“We run.” Troy hefted Yrsa to get a better hold on her, and then turned to run. Oder did the same, but they barely made ten paces before the huge queen morwi spat out Loki’s remains and rushed forward.

She was on Oder in the blink of an eye. The old man screamed in pain as he was grabbed.

This time Troy let Yrsa slide to the ground, and reached for the only weapon that might work against the huge insect – the grenade. But the old man was being held in front of the creature and was too close – he killed her, he killed Oder.

Suddenly, rocks began to rain down, as the roof started to cave in.

“Run,” Oder begged through his agony. The old man then reached into his pocket and pulled out something wrapped in vine leaves.

As more boulders thumped down around them, Troy lifted Yrsa again.

“See you in Valhalla, friend,” Troy yelled and backed up.

As Oder was crushed, his last actions was to smash the contents of the leaves against the queen’s head, right where Loki’s axe had created a small dent and abrasion.

Then the cave came down, and the ant queen turned and with Oder still in it jaws withdrew quickly back into the deeper part of the hive.

Troy sped away, sprinting past hordes of morwi returning now to the hive. Perhaps they were being called by the queen, or maybe they knew she was under attack.

As he reached the blessed light, he turned to look back as the sound of grinding and collapsing stone filled the air.

The mountainous dragon had its snout buried in the earth, and its tongue was snaking out to lap up hundreds of the morwi each time. And then it would dig some more.

Good, Troy thought. Kill them all.

Yrsa groaned and blinked up at him. She smiled and reached up to touch his face.

“This time I’m carrying you,” he said and ran on.

The queen took the remains of her colony to the center of the hive in the deep caves and well beyond the dragon’s reach. It mattered not if they were buried for a day, a week, or a year. They could always tunnel back out, and they had plenty of stored food.

Even the eggs could serve as food to ensure the survival of the queen.

She knew of the drekka from her warriors’ foraging, and they had been ignored by it. But their numbers had attracted it.

It didn’t matter. The hive was eternal, and when they had enough numbers, it too would one day be food for their masses.

She continued on to the deep chamber, chewing on the delicious meat of the small warm blooded creature she held in her mouth as she went.

CHAPTER 30

It was the darkest part of the night when Bromdin staggered back to his chieftain's hut, the biggest one that looked over the entire village.

He had already removed all of Yrsa's belongings and replaced them with his own meagre ownings, which were little more than battle-scarred weapons, and some pottery.

As he came through the doorway he frowned as he needed to duck underneath the door frame top and took plodding steps toward the bed. His head pounded with an ache that felt like he had an axe embedded in its center, and every joint and muscle felt like it was on fire.

There was a polished metal shield on one wall that acted as a mirror and Bromdin bent down low to stare into it. His brows came together, and he reached up to touch his cheek that seemed rough and long.

He roared and punched out at the shield, denting the hard steel deeply.

"*Morag!*" he roared, and even his voice sounded different.

He had set her up in a hut just down the hill from him and knew she always listened out for his voice.

She made for a fine servant, as he needed someone to look after him. To bring him water and food. And also to pleasure him.

"*Morag!*" He yelled even louder this time and grimaced at the coarseness in his throat.

"Coming, my chieftain," he heard her call from outside.

She came into the dark hut, and immediately lifted her own lantern.

"Put out the light," he slurred.

"Why?" she asked.

"*Do it!*" he roared, and the woman took a step back.

Bromdin sat on the edge of the bed, and seeing the woman nearer now he was taken aback that she just seemed so, *small*.

Morag came forward timidly, still holding the lantern. When she was a few paces from him she stopped.

"Bromdin?" she said softly. "My Bromdin?"

He sat there, staring back at her, his anger beginning to swell at her for not doing as he asked.

She held up the light, and he stood.

"Your Bromdin." He reached for her.

She screamed.

CHAPTER 31

Troy and Yrsa ran through the jungle. They had to stop frequently as Yrsa was still not back to her full strength and once almost swooned, causing Troy to force her to sit.

"I will not be ready," she said wearily while holding her head.

"You will be," Troy replied.

But now he had his doubts. She was still wearing out too quickly. And there were big challenges ahead. Life and death challenges.

Yrsa was a good warrior, and a good fighter. But a full grown male Viking warrior would be bigger and stronger than her, and also have just won the challenges so would be of the most skilled amongst them.

"I do not blame the clan for choosing another chieftain," she scoffed softly. "They believed me dead, and the clan needed leadership." She shrugged. "I have other things to keep me happy now." She reached out a hand and took his.

Troy crouched beside her. "You do. But remember, you are the daughter of the great chieftain, Skarde, and were crowned by him. So answer me this." He asked, "Would the clan be better off under your leadership, or one of the challengers?"

She smiled. "I was a good chieftain. I think I was wise and strong."

"Clan Fjall needs that. All the clans need that." He looked into her eyes. "You now have the Odin sword. You have the right to challenge. And you have me."

Troy dragged her to her feet, pushed her back a step, and drew his sword. "So challenge."

She obviously knew what he was doing and pulled the gleaming silver-flecked sword he had given her, and swiped at him.

Troy stepped out of the way of the strike and used his own sword to thrust at her. And he struck her, and without her leather or metal breastplate armor he cut her skin.

She didn't flinch and came back, slicing diagonally one way then the other in the air. Troy parried the blows. But they were a weak attack. And she made the mistake of coming in too close, and he ducked, and then rammed his shoulder into her center.

With an audible *oof*, she went down on her ass in the dirt. And stayed down, shaking her head and breathing hard.

"Even this play tires me. I'm still too weak." She looked up and smiled sadly. "I need many more days to recover my strength."

He sheathed his sword and sat next to her. He put his arm around

her shoulders and she leaned into him.

"You went into the morwi nest and fought the monsters there. And the morwi are no more. You saved Lemuria for all the people of the land, not just the Fjall. They will sing songs about you long after you are gone." He hugged her and kissed the top of her head.

"You did that," she said softly.

"No, *we* did that," he replied. "You are the bravest and strongest woman I have ever known." He took his arm from her. "And if it comes to it, let me be your strong arm. Let me be your champion."

She turned. "You already are." She half smiled. "We might be running to meet our end."

"I know. But what an end that will be," he said softly.

"Then in the time we have left, love me. I have enough strength for that." She smiled as she lay back.

Troy and Yrsa jogged up the side of the mountain. They were just hours away from entering Fjall clan territory.

Yrsa slowed. "There is danger here," she whispered. "Hold." She held up a hand to him and walked a few paces forward.

Troy had his red blanket cloak over his shoulders, and pushed one side back revealing the hilt of his sword.

Suddenly from just beside Yrsa two huge Vikings launched themselves from the jungle with sword and axes raised.

Yrsa drew her sword in a blink and parried the sword thrust. But next, the huge axe went up, and Troy knew that when it came down it would blow apart the defense from her weakened arm.

In a blink he had crossed the ten feet to her, his own sword raised. And as the axe came down his blade came quicker. It struck just below the axe man's elbow, hard and fast, severing the limb. And with a howl, and a geyser of rich, red blood, the axe with hand and forearm still attached, spun off into the air.

The man turned to see the furious face of the giant black-haired Viking in a red cloak.

"*You*," he said, as Troy side-swiped him in a backhand cut across his neck.

The man fell to the side clutching his spurting stump and grimaced as his life blood drained away.

The other Viking was pushing Yrsa back. He had to wait, as there was no opportunity to intervene as their weapons clanged together.

Yrsa held up the Odin blade, and the attacking Viking hit it backwards, knocking it aside. For a brief instant she sat defenseless awaiting the killer thrust from the man.

Her eyes slid to him, and her lips pressed tight. She would never call for help. But that glance was enough for Troy. He threw his sword

with all his strength, and it pierced one side of the attacking Viking's neck to appear out the other.

He coughed and turned, and Troy walked toward him. He raised his sword to Troy, but before he could bring it down, Yrsa grabbed Troy's blade handle and ripped it out one side of his neck. His head flopped to the side on his shoulder.

She watched the man topple to the dirt, and then handed Troy his blade. She then looked at him with brows drawn together, but a small curve to her lips. "I never asked for your help."

He smiled back. "I told you; I am your right arm. I am part of you. If you are attacked, so too am I." He smiled. "I only live because you live."

Troy bent to lift the man's head and turned it to her. "Do you recognize him?"

She nodded. "A foolish young man by the name of Agnor."

"Who had obviously been ordered to stop you returning." He threw the head back into the dirt. "We must stay alert. Whoever the new chieftain is, he fears your return. There will be more traps."

She growled deep in her chest. "Those fools don't know what's coming."

He smiled. "That's more like it."

Troy and Yrsa were close now and walked cautiously up the path. And then stepping out came a huge figure of significant girth.

Druuna's face split with a wide grin and he held log-like arms wide.

"It is as I wished." He went down on one knee. "My chieftain returns." He scoffed. "And only one man could bring her back from the land of the dead."

"Stand, faithful Druuna. I'm not dead and never was." Yrsa held out a hand to haul the big man to his feet. "Tell me what has happened? Have the trials been won? Is a new chieftain sitting on the throne?"

"Yes, and no." He exhaled and nodded wearily. "Bromdin defeated Lurnox in battle. The elder council has approved the challenge, and he is to be chieftain. But he has not completed the ordeals set for him just yet." His brows went up. "The council said they would allow a challenge if ever you returned." He then looked down at the ground. "However, Bromdin has been busy drawing favor amongst the elders, and I think they changed their minds."

"I think he does not want a challenge," Yrsa said. "I think he wants me dead long before the arena. We were attacked on the pathway here by a pair of assassins. Agnor was one of them."

Druuna snorted softly. "I know Agnor; a follower of Bromdin. The other was undoubtedly Linthen. Are they...?"

"Now wandering the mid-world without honor," Troy replied.

“Good.” Druuna exhaled through his nose, ruffling the hair on his bearded face. “You must be careful of Bromdin,” he warned. “He is a skilled fighter, and cunning.” He cast his eyes over Yrsa’s weakened frame. “And he is very strong.”

“Odin’s will shall prevail.” She half smiled. “Besides, I now have the strongest right arm in all the land.”

“Nevertheless, be on your guard. He has rewarded some with high positions in the clan, and they will not want to give up their comforts easily,” he warned, but then brightened. “But little Stromson is safe and being cared for, and will be overjoyed to see you.”

Druuna looked to Troy, and suddenly realization dawned on him. “And I dare say, that he might be interested in finally meeting his father.” He grinned.

Druuna stood aside. “I wish you both the luck, wisdom, and strength of the gods.” He lifted his huge axe. “And you have my arm whenever you call for it.”

Troy gripped the man’s shoulder. “You’re a good man. But I have a task for you.”

Druuna’s brows went up. “Name it.”

“You are to gather the council, and tell them Yrsa, daughter of Skarde, and the true leader of clan Fjall has returned after vanquishing the morwi.” Troy stared into his face. “And she and her war counsellor demand an audience.”

Druuna smiled. “It will be an honor, and a delight to see the looks on their withered faces. And where will you be?” he asked.

“I have to accompany a mother who needs to see her son.” Troy turned to Yrsa. “And she needs to introduce him to his father.”

Druuna bowed, placed the axe over his shoulder and jogged up the path to the village. Troy and Yrsa took a different route, that would take a little longer, but would bring them in close to where Stromson was being looked after.

Also, not moving through the heart of the village would stop word of their arrival moving amongst the clan until they were ready.

It took them nearly an hour to come in via a side pathway, amongst the huts where the trades people worked. Troy had removed his flaring red cloak, and he and Yrsa kept their heads bowed.

Even amongst the giant Vikings, Troy stood out as, unlike the rest of the men who were blonde or ginger-haired, his hair was long and coal black.

Yrsa led him to a large hut that housed the orphan children. From inside there was babbling, laughter, and a few cries.

Yrsa threw back the cover over the door and entered, followed by Troy. Inside there were about a dozen children, some up to about five years old, a few babies, and a group of toddlers playing with wooden

toys.

Troy spotted the dark-haired boy straight away, who turned, his wide blue eyes finding Yrsa immediately, and he raised little chubby hands as her face broke into a huge smile.

“Móðir, móðir,” he yelled.

The old Norse word for mamma made Troy smile and Yrsa rushed to him, lifted him and held him up for a moment before hugging him in close to her.

The boy squirmed, squealed, and laughed, and Yrsa brought him to Troy. Around his neck was the timepiece, the blue-faced broken watch he had given Yrsa two years ago.

Yrsa held the boy in the crook of one arm, as the boy’s eyes lifted to Troy.

“I promised you that your father, the mightiest warrior in all the world, would return for you.” She held Stromson up. “And he did.”

Stromson’s face was one of questioning. As he stared, Yrsa pushed him into Troy’s arms and he held the boy, who continued to stare back into his eyes, which were duplicates of his own.

His chubby fingers found Troy’s long hair and he held it, feeling it, and staring at it, before looking back into Troy’s face.

“You are my son,” Troy said softly. “I have crossed frozen seas, dragon lands, and fought monsters and men to be here. And you and your mother have made it all worth it.”

Yrsa came and hugged them both, and never had Troy felt so complete in his life. After a moment, she stepped back, and motioned to one of the midwives to take the boy.

“And now, we must show the clan we have returned,” she said. “And show them who the real leader of the Fjall is.”

Troy placed the flaring red cloak around his shoulders. “By the end of this day, you will be chieftain again. And Odin’s pity on anyone who gets in our way.”

CHAPTER 32

“You see that?” Axol half turned. “That big asshole has a wife and kid. That’s why he came back.”

Jurgan nodded. “Yeah, but one thing; that’s not just a kid...” He turned, leering, “...that’s fucking leverage.” He scratched his chin. “He’s the only one that we can understand. So he’s the only one that can tell us where the treasure is.”

He turned away and crept back from the hillside. He called the men in. There were just twenty of them remaining.

Each of the men looked hungry, violent, and would have cut Jurgan’s throat in a second. But they had come this far and were not going to go home without something for their trouble, and so far he promised them riches. So riches it would be.

The men gathered around.

“We haven’t got the guns or ammunition to fight them all. So we need to draw him away from them. We draw him out and make him tell us what we want. And we need to have something that will stop him tearing us to pieces.”

He pointed at three of the men; the most wiry and quick amongst them, Endor, Anje, and Billa. “You three will steal the baby. Bring it back. He’s our golden ticket.” He was about to turn away, but then spun back. “And make sure you get the right one, or I’ll cut your fucking heads off myself.”

“What about the woman? The mother? She might follow,” Endor asked.

Jurgan shrugged. “We take her prisoner as well.”

“And if she fights?” Anje asked.

Jurgan shrugged. “Kill her. If we have the kid, *the right one...*” He glared, “... then we don’t need her anyway.”

Gilfal turned away from watching the Viking village. “Hey.” He waved his arm. “Something is happening.”

CHAPTER 33

Troy and Yrsa headed to the large round hut at the center of the village.

Word had now spread of her return, and many of the Fjall had come out, to smile, wave, or stare at her and the huge dark-haired Viking with her, who it was said was her war counsellor who had returned from the mythical outside world, but that he had been touched by the gods and been given their size and strength.

Troy was allowed to enter the hall, maybe because the council wanted to get a look at him out of curiosity. But only Yrsa was allowed to address them.

She stood with legs planted and chin lifted. "You sent me to make war on the morwi. Which I did. And the war was brutal, and all my warriors gave their blood and life in battle, and now sit in Odin's Great Hall. But I prevailed, and the morwi are gone."

She looked at each of them in turn. "And my reward is coming back to be told my crown has been usurped."

Their eyes constantly moved from her to the huge figure of Troy in his red cloak. Audor cleared his throat.

"You know the law, Yrsa, daughter of Skarde. The clan must have a chieftain. You could not be found and were gone longer than you said. We had no choice." He shook his head. "Clan Fjall now has a new leader. It was done via the trials and fairly won."

She pulled out the long silver-flecked sword and held it up. "I hold Odinvarg, the sword of Odin." She stuck it in the ground before her. "The sword of the very first chieftain. It is my right to have my throne returned." Her eyes moved over each of them. "That is also the law."

Their eyes went wide as they stared at the weapon. Some rose to their feet and came to examine it. They drew it from the dirt and Yrsa crossed back to Troy and looked up at him.

"They have no choice."

The old men ran hands over the silver blade, the jeweled pommel, and the crafted hilt.

"It is as she says," Ivar announced.

The men conferred for a moment, before sitting back down to face the pair.

Audor came to his feet. "You have a lot of support in the clan. But Bromdin also has clan support now. This would split the clan at a time we need unity. The throne cannot easily be handed back as it was

fairly won.” He held up a finger. “But there is another way for us to unite the clan rather than tear it apart. And also avoid blood being spilt.”

Yrsa waited, and Troy didn’t like the way the elder smiled.

“Therefore, it is the council’s decision that you and Bromdin, who has not yet chosen a queen, be wed to unite the clan once and for all.” Audor folded his arms.

“What?” Troy couldn’t believe what he had just heard.

Yrsa’s eyes blazed like blue fire. “*Never.*”

“It is done,” Audor announced, as he waved away their objection.

The men stood.

Yrsa dragged the sword from the ground, and with a roar, swung it over her head and then brought it down on the thick wooden table, where it embedded deep. She left it there.

“Then I demand the right of *holmgang*,” she seethed.

Troy had only heard this mentioned once years back. *Holmgang* was where a clan member who felt they were wronged or offended could challenge a rival. If the rival refused or the other party did not turn up for the *holmgang*, they were deemed *niðingr*, a coward, and could have all their belongings stripped from them. Or worse, be sentenced to banishment.

The law was rare, but the law existed.

Audor shook his head sadly. “The betrothed cannot challenge the betrothed.” He chuckled. “After all, being offended is part of being married.”

The other men laughed, and Yrsa yanked the sword out.

“I order *holmgang*. And it will be satisfied by my champion, my war counsellor, and the father of my child, Troyson, son of Strom. That is the law.” She turned and handed Troy the Odin sword, who took it with a bow.

Troy held it up. “I receive Odinvar, the sword of Odin, and I accept the challenge to fight for the right of *holmgang* as your champion, Yrsa, daughter of Skarde, and rightful chieftain of the Fjall.”

Yrsa turned back to the gathered elders, and her eyes narrowed. “If you go against the clan law, you forfeit your right to sit on the council.” She smiled with zero humor. “And then my war counsellor would have the authority to remove you.”

Some of the men made guttural noises of disgust, and some smiled, either in support, or at the thought of the battle to come by this black-haired giant against Bromdin, the champion of the trials.

Audor finally stood. “*Holmgang* is recognized.” He turned to the other elders in the room. “Bring Bromdin to the arena and tell him the first challenge of his leadership is upon him.” He knocked on the table three times with the knuckles of one hand. “In one hour, the trial by

ordeal shall begin. *Holmgang* shall be satisfied.”

Bromdin groaned as the thump came on his door. He opened sticky eyes and slowly sat up.

He knew something was wrong with him, and the pounding on the door matched the pounding in his head. It was dark inside his chieftain's hut, but he was used to it.

“Come,” he said from a throat he barely recognized as his own.

The warrior entered in the darkness and bowed. “My chieftain, Yrsa has returned and claims the right of *holmgang*. Her war counsellor will be her champion.” He remained bowed. “You are summoned to defend against this challenge. One hour in the arena.”

Bromdin felt anger surge through his gut at the thought of the challenge. “I will meet this challenger and crush his bones.”

The man left and Bromdin rubbed his face, that still felt numb, rubbery, and strangely unrecognizable beneath his fingers.

He drew his hands back and sniffed at them; they smelled odd, and then looking at them, he saw the dark stains. He also tasted something visceral in his mouth, that was familiar and not unpleasant.

He lifted himself to his feet, and swayed, feeling his head graze the ceiling, and he lit a lamp and turned. His eyes went wide. There was Morag on the floor. Or what was left of her. She had been dismembered, and her stomach ripped wide, and ribcage exploded open. Even he could see that not all of the woman was there, and suddenly he knew what that taste was in his mouth – blood and guts.

What have I done? he begged of himself.

You ate her, and you enjoyed it, his twisted mind answered.

He shook his huge head and turned away. He quickly went to the large water bowl and bathed his hands and face and leaned down to look in the bent shield that had been his reflection.

He froze. Who was that? *What* was that?

He didn't recognize what he saw at all.

He spun away from his reflection, anger boiling inside him.

He'd been poisoned. They did this to him. The challenger and the daughter of Skarde. Because they want him to lose.

He held up one huge, lumped fist. He would destroy this challenger, and all others who tried to usurp him.

He turned to punch the polished shield on the wall again, this time destroying the steel completely.

It wasn't clan Fjall anymore. It was clan Bromdin. The time of Bromdin was here.

Druuna was in the cell room with Troy and Yrsa as they prepared

for the challenge and waited for the clan to fill the arena. Troy peered out through the bars in the heavy door.

He saw that the elder counsellor's chairs all remained empty and guessed they wanted to arrive late to make an entrance. He also saw that the central throne of the chieftain was empty. The crown now sat on a pillow on its seat – at the end of this day, someone would be wearing it, and Troy would fight to the death to ensure that was Yrsa.

“Bromdin has a strong backswing with an axe. It is his favored weapon,” Druuna said. “He also uses a sword with ease and his size and youth means he does not tire quickly.”

“I understand,” Troy replied.

Druuna then placed a hand on Troy's shoulder. “I watched him against Lurnox. He attacked his legs, cut deeply so the blood ran freely. Lurnox slowed as his strength drained away and was then overcome quickly.” His brows knit. “Strangely quickly.”

Troy turned and saw Yrsa pacing. She stopped. “I should be having this fight.”

“Maybe you should,” he said. “But you must follow the law of the clan you hope to lead.” He half smiled. “I just hope I am not defeated this day, and I win your crown for you.” He stared into her face. “And I win your hand for me.”

Her mouth turned down. “Oh, you have more than my hand, Troyson Strom.” She placed a hand on her heart. “You have this.” Then to her lips. “And this.”

Yrsa quickly fumbled inside a pouch attached to her belt and brought something small out. She pressed it to his lips, and he took it in his mouth. His tongue felt the smoothed shape – and he knew immediately what it was – a small jade heart, representing her heart and strength, that he would carry with him into battle.

He swallowed it, and then kissed her lips hard. If it was their last kiss, he would take the memory of it with him to Valhalla.

She pulled him closer, her eyes fierce. “You will not be defeated.” She stood back then, and her face became grave. “Odin's strength be with you, mighty Troyson, son of Strom.”

A horn sounded, low and deep, and the gate was pulled back.

He now had everything he needed and bowed to her, and then turned back to the now open doorway.

Troy stepped out to a wave of cheers from the crowd – he couldn't tell whether it was supportive, just Viking bloodlust, or they remembered his last appearance in the arena and knew who he was.

From the other side of the arena floor was the second chamber and there was a din from within of guttural shouts, snarling, and coarse roars, and Troy wasn't sure they even sounded like they came from a

human throat.

Troy rolled his shoulders. He had the sword of Odin in a scabbard over his shoulder, and a dagger in his belt. For now, he left them there waiting to see what Bromdin came out with. He expected an axe, which Druuna had told him was the man's favorite battle weapon.

Troy knew battle axes well; they were effective, but cumbersome. Unless they were wielded by a strong and experienced arm.

He flexed his fingers into fists; he was feeling good, confident, and strong, and boosted by Yrsa's words. He would not be defeated. He would not go down, and he would never give up fighting no matter how many wounds he sustained.

He'd done this before and had fought a Viking when he was nearly half the size he was now. And he had defeated a dinosaur with just a raptor claw and knife.

In moments more, the horn sounded again, and he wasn't sure if it was a second blast from impatience, or the second call for the other combatant to come out.

And then he did.

The thick wooden door exploded outwards onto the arena.

Behind him, he heard Yrsa gasp. And then he saw why.

What emerged was hard to reconcile as being human, no matter how big they got. The red lumped mass stood about twelve-feet tall, and was all bulging muscle, bigger on one side with an arm that nearly dragged on the ground.

The skin looked stretched tight and was covered in wriggling veins pulsing blood. There were tufts of hair running from his oversized head down his back, shoulders and chest.

But it was his face that was the most monstrous. The nose was gone and there was just a double hole in the center of his face below eyes that bulged red with fury and madness.

"Bromdin?" Troy whispered.

The crowd had gasped but had now fallen to silence. And that told Troy this was not how the man usually looked. Something had happened. He had somehow changed or been changed.

The weapon he had chosen wasn't an axe but a large hammer, with the block end weighing at least five hundred-pounds, and had obviously been chosen because of its size, and it being the only thing big enough for the monster.

"I am Bromdin." He grinned with massive spade-like teeth. "You are the outworlder," he said with a deep, mushy voice.

"What has happened to you?" Troy stared.

"I visited the drekka cave." He began to laugh. "And it shared some of its power with me."

The rubies, Troy knew then. The same things he believed caused

him to grow, and then grow again when he returned to Lemuria. Could too much close exposure cause this type of mutation and disfiguration? he wondered.

Bromdin threw his arms wide, and Troy could see the weird lopsidedness of his body. One side was hugely powerful, but the other was just warped by lumped muscle and by the way he hefted that titanic hammer, he must have been enormously powerful. Far greater than Troy was.

And then Bromdin began to run at him.

Troy felt the ground shaking beneath his boots every time the ogre's feet pounded down. Troy knew he also needed momentum so began to run back at Bromdin. In his mind's eye he saw what he would do – jink right, sidestep left, and as he passed by, slash out with his blade at the tree trunk thick left leg.

Troy doubted he could ever take the giant head on, as he couldn't possibly block a swing from that wrecking ball-sized hammer. But he could wear him down with a few well-placed cuts to bleed him out.

As the pair came together, Troy jinked, stepped back hard, and then flicked out the silver-flecked blade – and that was when the hammer swung like lightning to hit him in the chest.

He flew backwards forty feet, and the sword was blasted from his hands. Troy then impacted with the arena wall, and fell to the ground, groaning in agony.

He had never been hit so hard in his life and the pain was excruciating. His entire ribcage was on fire, and he looked down to see the bronze and leather chest plate armor was heavily dented, and he bet his ribs were either bruised or fractured. Right now, breathing was like sucking in fire.

Laying on the ground he felt the ground begin to shake and knew exactly what it was. He struggled to his feet, but too late.

He was grabbed by the red cloak and flung backwards to fly again and hit the ground and roll.

It seemed the mutation had given Bromdin more than just size and strength, but speed as well. And if he didn't adapt his fight plan, he'd be dead within the next few minutes.

Troy felt rather than saw the monster looming over him, and he rolled fast just as the hammer struck the ground with such force it shattered the hard pressed clay.

He got to his feet and immediately changed angles as he ran as the hammer came down again and again just behind him, and then swung sideways trying to catch him in the midsection.

Next time he felt the whoosh of fast moving air just behind his head, knowing he was only inches in front of Bromdin's reach. And the worst of it was, he was the one that was starting to tire from all

the evasive running, not Bromdin.

Troy had to slow for a second to gather up the magnificent sword and Bromdin reached out one long arm, his club-like fingers questing for Troy's long flowing red cloak. And that gave Troy an idea.

As he ran, jinking from one side to the other, he unclasped the cloak, and then turned, and flicked it up at Bromdin's face, where the heavy material landed and wrapped around his head. Bromdin's free hand went to rip it away, but in that split second he was blinded, Troy took his one and only chance.

He stopped, turned, and as Bromdin lumbered on while pulling the cloak free, Troy planted his legs, and lunged forward and upward with the blade just as Bromdin dragged the cloak free.

The giant's eyes went wide as the first thing he saw was Troy right in front of him, and quick as he was, he could not stop or avoid what was coming.

Troy plunged Odinvar in and up under Bromdin's jaw, up through the throat, the palate, and on into the center of his brain. And then the immensely sharp and super hardened tip appeared out the top of his skull.

Bromdin reflexively jerked back, taking the sword from Troy's hands, and he staggered around the arena for a moment with the blade lodged there.

Amazingly, he pulled it free and tossed it aside. And then to Troy's horror, he once again lifted his hammer.

He stomped toward Troy, but one of his eyes was now totally blood red. Bromdin readied his weapon.

Troy pulled out his other weapon, the dagger, which now seemed a tiny metal tooth against a mutated giant.

There was blood on Bromdin's lips, and he saw it running from the second mouth opened under his chin. The ogre lifted his gaze to Troy, and then Troy saw the totally red eye's eyelid begin to droop.

Troy backed up, turned and jogged to where his sword lay, and returned with it as Bromdin slowed down.

The huge man lowered his arm as the entire side of his face hung slack. In the next few steps he let the hammer drop, as all his features began to droop.

"The Valkyries descend for me," he said in the thick voice.

His good eye remained fixed on Troy. "Free me."

Troy lunged forward with the long sword, and using both hands pierced his chest, driving the needle sharp blade into the center of the thick sternum and then using all his strength continued to push to pierce the huge muscle of the heart.

Bromdin thumped to his knees, his head down, and then he fell to the side, dead.

Troy pulled out the blade and sucked in deep torturous breaths, feeling his body's wracking pain from his scalp to his toes. He shivered as the adrenaline that had spiked in his system began to leak away, and he walked to the center of the arena, to a near deafening chant of: *Strom, Strom, Strom.*

Yrsa flew out of the barred doorway and ran toward him.

He knew she wanted to be in his arms. But that was not a fitting spectacle for the chieftain of the Fjall.

"Stop," he said, just loud enough for her to hear.

She frowned in confusion but halted. Troy went down on one knee and held out the sword of Odin.

She understood, then took it, held it high, and turned slowly.

Troy stood and faced the cheering crowd. "The true chieftain of the Fjall has returned," he said in a booming voice as Yrsa continued to turn slowly, taking in all the arena's occupants.

The crowd erupted, and Troy was happy to see there was approval for what had transpired.

Yrsa stepped right up toward the sitting elders and the crowd hushed.

"I went to face the morwi. To fight them. And I did, and they have been driven back," she said. "My war counsellor has returned." She turned and nodded to Troy. "The Fjall will be strong again." She held up the sword. "On Odinvar, the sword of Odin, I claim the right as chieftain. Let any who would challenge this right step forward now."

There was silence for many long seconds before the crowd applauded again, and this time they stood and stamped their feet creating a deafening din until Audor, the senior elder, came to his feet and waved them to silence.

"The council recognizes Yrsa, daughter of Skarde." He looked around. "She has laid down the challenge. Is there anyone who would fight her, or her champion, for leadership?"

Troy heard a few murmurs, and he looked around to some of the younger men, but none would meet his eyes and grew quiet when his gaze was on them. He guessed watching him defeat the giant mutated Viking was enough to cool their blood.

Yrsa stood there glaring back at the old men who drew out their time in the sun just a little longer. In the end Audor bowed and called Yrsa up to them.

She sheathed the silver-flecked sword and went up into the stands. Troy stayed in the arena and Druuna joined him and placed a meaty hand on his shoulder. Troy winced from the rib pain but nodded to his friend.

"A mighty battle," Druuna said and handed Troy back his red cloak collected from the ground.

Troy donned it and turned to half smile. "Today was a good day. And luck was with me."

"No, I think today you needed the speed and strength of Thor to defeat that monster." He looked to the body of Bromdin. "He had become a berserker. Beating him was no chance happening."

Yrsa had made her way to the throne and the crowd parted to allow her to move through them. Some touched her as she walked past, or bowed, showing their deference.

Audor lifted the crown and with a glance at the other elders, and then over at the crowd, he placed it on her head.

Yrsa turned to stand in front of the throne for a moment, before sitting. She raised her hand, but never had a chance to speak.

Troy spun at the sound.

"Gunfire," he said softly as his brows came together. "Here."

He took a few steps, listening intently. And then he heard a woman wailing from outside, and in seconds more he could hear her voice right through the wooden walls of the arena.

"The nursery!" she screamed.

Troy spun to look at Yrsa. Her eyes were wide, and he knew they both had the same thought – *Stromson*.

Yrsa and Troy both headed for exits, the rest of the crowd mumbled and jostled, but had no idea what the sounds were.

In seconds he and Yrsa were weaving through the near empty clan village and arrived to find the nurse maid slumped in the arms of another woman. There was blood on her chest.

Yrsa skidded to a stop and crouched down beside the stricken woman. "Helga," she whispered.

"They took him," the woman rasped. "The little people."

Yrsa was on her feet sprinting into the large nursery hut, and Troy knelt beside Helga and drew her top to the side. He saw the two bullet wounds in the woman's chest.

Someone had come from the outside world. Who? he wondered. Surely not any surviving villagers that had been at the crystal lake. They were all dead. He looked up as a potential answer came in a question: did the marauders somehow follow them?

Yrsa appeared in a flash, her eyes wide with fear and fury. "Which way?" she demanded.

Helga pointed, and Yrsa sprinted away.

"See to Helga." He pointed at her chest. "She has, *ah*, iron embedded within her wounds."

Troy then ran after Yrsa.

Yrsa ran fast and Troy struggled to keep up with her – he knew what was going through her head – she was a lioness in search of her cub – nothing would slow her down.

In minutes more they had left the village center and were heading up to the hills. She stopped and Troy caught up, and she searched the ground. She had far better tracking skills than Troy and he relied on her.

In seconds she pointed at some scuff marks in the soil, looked up, and then ran off again.

In moments more they came to a clearing and at its center stood a man, of normal size, and ominously, he was grinning.

As Yrsa came closer and then Troy, he became less sure of himself, probably due to the giant size of the pair of Vikings and the looks on their faces.

Yrsa screamed in ancient Norse, but the man shook his head. She lunged at him, grabbing him by the neck and lifting.

Troy grabbed her forearm and urged her to release him. She did, her ice-blue eyes near bulging with fury and her teeth grit.

“Speak,” Troy said to the man.

He coughed and rubbed his neck, but then his grin returned. “We have your big, bouncing bubba.” He shrugged. “But we don’t really want him, we just want the treasure. You give us that Viking loot, you get the boy, and we go home. Simple.” He nodded at Yrsa. “You can tell her.”

Troy shook his head. “No. If I tell her that she will take your head.” Troy leaned closer. “Give us back our son, or I promise you, none of you will leave this island alive.”

The man swallowed but straightened. Perhaps he was more scared of his leader than of Troy.

“Half of us are dead already, thanks to this godforsaken place.” He nodded over his shoulder. “Let me tell you, amongst our boys there are some bad and desperate people. You think they’ll just go home after all that death and trouble with nothing but a dumb smile on their faces?”

He growled and looked up at Troy from under lowered brows.

“Listen, those dragons made a mess of our land and left us nothing but ashes and bones. So you give us the treasure, so we go home with something, or you’ll get a piece of your son back. Then another piece.” He laughed cruelly. “Then another piece until we get what we want.”

Troy straightened. He had never felt such a volcanic hatred for anyone in his life.

The man bared his rotten teeth. “Hey, we know she’s in charge, so we don’t want to speak to you anymore. Tell her we want the treasure.”

Troy turned to Yrsa, who he saw was looking at the ground around the man. He turned back.

“As you wish.”

He told Yrsa the gist of what the man had said, and her eyes grew wide. Then with a volcanic fury, and a burst of movement, she screamed a Viking curse, drew her sword, and sliced the man from the shoulder to the groin.

With a look of complete surprise on his face, the man fell into two pieces.

She stood over the body with sword raised and teeth bared as if she was going to slice it again, “Yrsa,” Troy said. “Stromson. Which way?”

She lowered her sword, looked down at the ground again, and then to one of the pathways up into the hills. “This way.”

She began to run, and Troy followed.

CHAPTER 34

Jurgan ran hard through the jungle with the men. They had seen how the negotiations had gone with the woman and he wouldn't make the mistake of being polite again. If she wanted to play hard, he'd play harder.

"Stay together," he yelled.

But he knew that wasn't going to be possible as his men were scattering all through the jungle. And he knew several would be lost. It didn't matter; all he needed was a team big enough to hold off the Vikings, and then sail the boats back home.

He had already laid out their plans, and Jonke carried the boy, which was no easy feat, as the freaking kid was little more than a baby but must have weighed close to sixty pounds.

Jurgan knew they only had four guns and limited bullets, but it should be enough. They just needed to ensure every bullet counted.

They came to a clearing and Jurgan had already told them what he wanted and got the men quickly into position. He called Jonke out beside him, and had the man put a gun to the kid's head, who now wailed like a freaking siren.

He stood with a gun in his hand, and the other men hidden. It was time to take the negotiations up a level. And he'd do that himself.

Nema and Asof ran together and after about fifteen minutes Asof stopped his friend.

"Hey," he gasped. He walked with his hands on his hips, dragging in ragged breaths. "I can't see or hear anyone else."

Nema wiped his face and walked in a circle for a moment. "Ah fuck it, we lost 'em."

"Well, we need to find 'em, because I ain't staying in this damn jungle by myself." Asof walked a few paces to one side of the animal track and listened for anything that hinted at the crew. But there was nothing.

Nema looked up at the misty white sky. "No sun, no stars, no way."

"Maybe we should climb a tree." Asof looked at a few suitable ones. As he walked toward a line of bamboo-like plants a massive box-like head darted out and the jaws snapped shut inches from his arm.

"Fa-*rrrk!*" he yelled and fell back.

Nema had already turned away. "*Run.*"

So much for camaraderie, Asof thought, and scrambled to his feet

and sprinted blindly in the direction he thought his friend had taken. Amazingly, he now suddenly forgot how tired he was as more adrenaline flooded his system.

He spotted Nema and ran harder to catch up. They heard the huge creature following them, pushing small trees out of the way.

“Piss off!” Nema called.

Asof turned to his friend, expecting he had been talking to the monster coming after them.

“Run somewhere else,” Nema demanded, and veered away from Asof a little.

“Fuck you!” Asof replied, chasing after him.

Asof glanced back over his shoulder and saw the creature was gaining on him. It looked like some sort of cross between a pig and alligator, with four powerful legs ending in claws on the end of short fingers. And there were tusks protruding half a foot down along each side of its face.

The pair came to a steep hill and slid down. At the bottom the ground got a little boggy, and the men found it harder going – not great as the thing had much longer and more powerful legs than they had.

But oddly after a few minutes, Asof couldn’t hear the pursuer anymore.

He ran up beside Nema. “I think we lost it.”

They came to a more open area with few trees and a low mist over the ground that stunk of a miasmic corruption like a bog.

Just as Asof was about to stop and get his breath back the pair ran into a pond of something slick and muddy.

“Fuck...” Nema yelled.

They immediately sank to their waists.

The men quickly looked back to ensure they weren’t being stealthily followed and were about to be plucked from the mud like ripe fruit. But there was nothing other than a deathly silence and a revolting stink.

“It’s gone. It didn’t follow us.” Asof started to chuckle and turned. “What the fuck was that thing?”

“Who knows and who cares. On this island everything is fucked up.” Nema began to wade toward the bank. “Let’s find the boys and get out of here.”

Both men began to move forward, but in doing so sank another foot into the slimy muck on the pond bottom. And now, just trying to pull their feet up was near impossible in the sucking mud hidden beneath the brackish water.

“What’s going on here?” Nema asked. “This shit is like wet clay sticking to me.” He felt under the water. “It’s only about two feet of

water and then soft mud.”

“Lie down, lie down,” Asof said. “I heard that’s what you’re supposed to do in quicksand.” He lay forward.

Nema watched for a moment and then did the same. As he did, placing both hands in the water, something snaked past, touching him.

“*Shit!*” he yelled and pulled back. “There’s something in here with us.”

“Was it a fish?” Asof pulled out his blade, but his agitated movement sunk him to his belly.

“I hope so.” Nema did the same and both men stood now, sunk to their chests, with daggers in their hands.

About six feet from the men something rose from the water. It looked like a flowerhead on the end of wrist-thick, muscular pipe.

The petals of the flower thing bloomed open and on their tips were a ring of black glass-like eyes. And worse was what was inside – on the face of each of the petals were hundreds of things that looked like inward curving needles. And then at the core was a hole that had to be a throat that also had smaller needles.

It didn’t take much imagination to guess what those things were for – attaching to flesh and holding on.

The flower thing’s head slowly pursed back together and it sank below the murky water. In seconds the murky swamp returned to stillness.

“Is it gone?” Asof whispered.

“I fucking hope so,” Nema replied.

Both men floated closer to each other, and they slowly moved to be back to back.

And then just a few feet to their left, the thing rose again, closer now, and once again bloomed open. Both men pointed their blades at it. But then to their horror another rose to their right, and behind them a smaller one lifted.

“Oh god, there’s more,” Nema said in a small voice.

Asof started to try and swim away from Nema, breaststroke style. Behind him he heard Nema start to panic and thrash. And then he heard his friend scream and there was more thrashing. Asof didn’t want to but couldn’t help looking back.

His former shipmate had one of the flower things attached to the nape of his neck. And as he struggled, he saw that there was another smaller one sucking onto his chest.

Asof didn’t know if they were some sort of lamprey, and he remembered learning about them in school, and how they were hundreds of millions of years old and had no bones in them. They gripped onto fish with their weird round, needle mouths, and literally

bored a hole in the victim animal and then sucked their insides out.

But those were only about two feet long, and these things looked as long and thick as pythons.

“Help me!” Nema called.

“I can’t.” Asof shook his head. “I’ll get help.”

Sorry, Nema, he thought. But you’re a goner and I can’t do shit. Asof went back to swimming, and this time was slightly relieved to hear his friend screaming as it meant the monsters were still attacking someone else and were leaving him alone.

He was close to the bank, or at least a mangrove-like plant that had feeder roots like stilts reaching above the water. He’d grab one of those, and he’d be as good as out.

Behind him, Nema was now silent, and he glanced back over his shoulder to see the pond empty. Asof tried to say calm, slow stroke, bring his arms back out in front, and then slow stroke, and repeat, and repeat. He was nearly there now.

He reached up, and then felt something like a soft hand fumbling around at his groin, and for some reason thought it was somehow Nema.

But then the soft hand gripped, and dozens of needles sank into his dick and balls. And the shock and pain was like nothing he had ever experienced.

Asof yowled and curled into a ball, his own hands going for the attacker. And what they found was a thick, muscular pipe of flesh attached to him, and holding on tight.

Then it felt like someone had set his dick on fire as the flower ‘mouth’ worked to wear away the skin to get at the raw flesh.

He punched at it, cursed it, and tried to squeeze it with his thighs but nothing was going to make the thing let go.

Another of the gruesome creatures attached to his belly, needles in, and once again he felt the rasping as it was scouring away the skin to find softer meat inside.

He began to scream, then weep as more found him. And finally he was gently pulled under so the feasting could really begin.

CHAPTER 35

Troy ran hard trying to keep up with Yrsa, but she was like a gazelle bouncing and leaping through the jungle, launching herself over fallen logs and changing directions in rapid sidesteps.

Troy put on a burst of speed to catch up to about twenty feet behind her. "Yrsa, slow down. There could be..."

They came out into a clearing, and the gun shot was loud in the tree-lined space.

Yrsa screamed and went down clutching her chest, and when Troy arrived, he saw a single man standing there, with the gun pointed at his face.

"Take it easy, big fella, I'm a good shot and I know you can understand me." He nodded to the wounded Yrsa. "Unlike her."

Troy growled at him, but his priority was Yrsa and he went and knelt by her. He saw the bullet had entered her shoulder and was still in there.

There was only a little blood pulsing out, and thankfully he didn't think the bone was chipped or broken but the bullet had lodged in the meat. It would be extremely painful, but not life threatening. As long as the bullet was removed.

Troy leaned forward. "Take it easy. You've been shot. Stay calm."

She grabbed him. "Get. Stromson." And then. "Kill them all."

"Count on it," he said to her.

He ripped a bit of her tunic away and folded it, then placed it over the wound. "Hold that there," he said and then stood.

"Where is our son?" Troy glared.

"He's fine. For now." The man smiled. "He'll stay that way, but it all depends on you."

Troy looked about the clearing, and then back to the man.

The marauder's face grew serious as he must have seen Troy's expression change. "Now, you take it easy. I know you're judging how fast I can shoot and whether you could take a bullet and still rip me apart. You probably could being twice as big as me."

The smirk returned. "But let me tell you; there are other guns on you, *and* your lady friend." He shrugged. "Plus there's a knife to the throat of your little one. You want him back; I want something too. We trade, we all go home happy. How's that sound?"

Troy still glared, assessing how many he could kill, and if he could find Stromson before he was hurt. He slowly scanned the jungle, and

saw a few bodies hiding in there, but not all. And there was no sign of his son.

“My name is Jurgan. We followed you here,” he said, and then nodded to Yrsa. “Better make up your mind because lady there is losing blood. Better get her home for some loving treatment.”

Troy turned and saw Yrsa staring with white hot hate at the man. “I will tear him apart, and make a *Hræsvelgr* out of him, and laugh while he...”

Troy grunted and looked back to Jurgan. For a Viking, making a *Hræsvelgr* out of an enemy was one of the most gruesome tortures that could be inflicted on a human. It obviously came from the ancient mainland Vikings where the term was to make an eagle of your enemy prisoner, and that basically meant the ribs of the back were broken open and the lungs pulled out so they resembled wings. After a while the lungs dried and the enemy suffocated, but not before experiencing an excruciating pain until they drew their last breath.

Jurgan laughed. “Yeah, no need to translate what she said. I think I get it.” He lifted his chin, the gun still pointed at Troy’s face. “You tell her we’re even. I saw what she did to my man who just wanted to deliver my message to you.”

Troy’s eyes were unblinking. “What do you want?”

“That’s better. We’re just doing a business transaction.” Jurgan smiled. “So, what I want is the treasure. And no gold because that’s too freaking heavy. But where I’m from gemstones are still a tradable commodity.”

“You want gems?” Troy frowned. “That’s it?”

“I’m a simple man of simple tastes.” Jurgan hiked his shoulders, holding his arms wide for a moment before pointing the gun this time at Yrsa. “Where are the gems?”

Troy had an idea and folded his arms. “What about one gem, called Odin’s heart? It is a ruby, as big as your head, and prized by the Vikings above all others. It sits in a fortress on top of a hill.”

Jurgan bobbed his head from side to side. “That might do for starters. But we don’t want just one.”

“Inside the fortress is all manner of treasure, deposited there over thousands of years by the ancient Viking clans. You can take your pick,” Troy replied, and saw the flick of the eyebrows, and then delight on the man’s face.

“That might do,” Jurgan replied.

Troy half smiled. “It is a king’s treasure a hundred times over.”

“Done.” Jurgan nodded. “Here’s the deal. You take us to this Odin’s fortress for his heart. The woman stays here...” He saw Troy about to object, but he waved him down. “She gets to have the kid and will be tied up and under guard until we get back. Once we have the gems,

we get in our boats and leave, and you can go back to your shitty, stone-age life. Deal?"

Troy straightened. "I will take you there."

Troy watched as they secured Yrsa by the neck to a tree trunk and then with a call from Jurgan, a man emerged from the jungle holding Stromson who had a rag tied over his mouth. He pulled the rag away and the small boy sucked in a huge breath and then wailed until he was handed to Yrsa, upon where he immediately stopped crying and buried his face in her chest.

Troy knelt by them as the boy snuggled deeper into her. He lay a hand on the boy's head and the other on Yrsa's cheek.

His face was grim as he looked deep into her eyes. "I will lead them to Odin's fortress, and there they will get everything that is coming to them."

She nodded solemnly as she stroked Stromson.

Troy then gently peeled back the cloth he had placed over her wound to examine it. "There is a bullet in there, a small piece of iron. You must remove it so the wound can heal. Do you understand?"

"I can deal with this." She turned to look at the gathering men, then at her two guards, and then back to Troy. "And deal with them."

Troy looked back over his shoulder and saw the sly look in Jurgan's eyes and knew that once he had secured his treasure, they would kill him. Or try. And therefore it meant Yrsa was also as good as dead.

He leaned forward and kissed her. "They will kill you when we are gone. Free yourself and kill them all."

She smiled darkly.

"Hurry up," Jurgan said. "I want to get that big gem, see what else is in that treasure room, and then get the fuck out of here before your buddies find us."

Troy saw that of Jurgan's guards he would leave with Yrsa, only one of them had a gun. Looking around he saw there were only a few other guns, and most weapons were knives, machetes, and axes – *good*, he thought.

Troy straightened and looked down at the assembled men, he counted about eighteen. He turned to get his bearings, noting where the mountain was and worked out where the fortress would be.

He went to turn away.

"Wait," Jurgan said.

He raised his gun. "There'll be a gun pointed at the back of your head the whole trip. Make a wrong move and you're dead." He threw a glance at Yrsa. "You come back without us, and she's dead. We come back without treasure, and she's dead. Do we understand each other?"

"I understand you very well." Troy looked back at the men and

didn't see them as human beings, but more as just another dangerous animal to be killed. In fact, as far as he was concerned, they were already dead and just didn't know it.

He turned then. "Let's go."

Yrsa watched them go, and the two men stayed slightly behind her and out of her line of sight. She heard them talking, and she sat with her back to the tree and hummed as Stromson dozed on her chest. She gently stroked the back of his head.

They had stripped her of her visible weapons but had not searched her. The small pouch at her waist contained things that didn't interest them so they had left it for her.

After another twenty minutes she heard the pair sit and begin to talk softly, and then they must have had some food which they shared and talked some more.

She reached down to her boot that was made of a toughened leather from an *omanteter* that had a hide like stone, but when worked made for comfortable boots that were highly durable. On the inside it had a feathery down and she slid a hand in next to her knee, quickly finding the small blade hidden there.

She drew it out, keeping it in the palm of her hand, and then sat back for a moment, listening for any sound the men had seen her – there was none.

The hard thing in her flesh stopped her shoulder from working properly. Troy said it needed to come out before the wound could heal.

Yrsa then drew in a few deep breaths to steel herself and brought the blade up and dug it into the wound in her shoulder. After several minutes the blood flowed again, and the pain was excruciating. But she felt the hard thing embedded in the flesh, and after more digging she felt the hard pellet, worked it some more, and soon the flattened bullet came out to fall to her thigh.

She tucked the blade into her waist belt and then drew some ormarot root from her pouch, spat on it and worked it into a paste, and then smeared it over the wound.

Immediately she felt its numbing ease the pain and the blood stopped flowing. It sizzled a little, but the wound would be already starting to heal. She rolled her shoulder and smiled. It still hurt, but her arm and shoulder worked again.

Next she then carefully raised the blade to the rope at her neck and began to saw. Gradually the strands separated, and the ropes fell away.

She turned slowly and saw the men had made a small fire and stared into it. They had made a hot drink and mumbled to each other

in a language she didn't understand. Only one of them had the small thing Troy called a gun. So, that made him the dangerous one. And the first that needed to be killed.

She carefully put Stromson on the ground and got to a crouching position. She saw where they had left her weapons, and leaning up against a tree was Odinvar. Obviously the five foot-long sword was too heavy and unwieldy for the small people to carry so they had left it behind.

Yrsa crept towards it. As she neared it Stromson woke and began to make an irritable noise as he found himself alone.

The men turned to the boy, and on seeing the kid but no Viking woman, their eyes went wide, and the first mistake they made was looking at each other first.

It only cost them a second or two, but it was enough for Yrsa to get close.

With a growl of fury, she swung the blade in a backwards slice, cutting the gun man's head in half from eye level.

The other man made a noise like a squeak and jumped to his feet, but instead of engaging in battle, he sprinted away into the jungle.

Yrsa threw the sword with all her might and it speared the man in the lower back, where he went down hard.

She crossed to him, pulled her sword out and turned him over. She put a boot on his belly and looked down.

She didn't understand his words, or care what they were, but she knew he probably begged her. She placed the tip of her sword at his throat, grinned like a death's head into his face, and then slowly, ever so slowly, she pushed the blade into the flesh, until it slid in, and continued on until it exited the back of his neck and entered the soil behind his head.

His eyes bulged as he gurgled while drowning in his own blood. She pulled the sword out and then punctured both his eyes. She crossed to the other man with no top of his head and did the same.

She ripped a bit of his shirt away and used it to wipe her blade as she looked from one man to the other. "Your souls will wander the nothingness of *Niflheim* and may Hela torture you for all of eternity."

She then quickly sheathed her sword and scooped up Stromson. In seconds more she was heading back to the clan village.

Troy was leading them to Odin's fortress that was guarded by the drekka. But she knew to keep them from her, he would sacrifice himself. And she would not let that happen. Not now that she had finally got him back.

She put her head down and began to run hard.

Troy climbed to the top of the small row of mountains that looked

down into a thick forested valley. There were massive emerald canopies that refused even the slightest glimpse of the ground, and in amongst them monstrous palm leaves as large as a school bus fought for the silvery light falling from the ice ceiling above them.

He saw a few of his old friends, the undertakers, swooping from treetop to treetop, and he guessed that with the morwi gone the wildlife was returning – and that was a good and bad thing – more game, more predators, more danger.

In the distance he saw the huge tree, bigger than all others in the jungle forest and knew that below it was the fortress they had found years before.

He looked slowly over the landscape, looking for a myriad of dangers, but there was one giant-sized one, he looked for the most.

Jurgan sidled up next to him. “What are we waiting for?”

“See that.” Troy motioned to the west where the jungle looked brown and patchy like a scabby flank of a mangy dog. “That’s where the morwi were on the march. They ate everything – the meat first, anything that couldn’t get out of their way. Then they began to eat the plants.”

“The what?” Jurgan asked.

“Giant ants,” Troy replied. “We stopped them. With a little help from the drekka.”

Jurgan snorted. “Good for you, and whoever those drekka guys are.”

“Yeah.” Troy laughed softly.

He then pointed to the massive central mountain. “See that? It’s called the Mother of the Sky. We need to keep that to our east as we pass through that jungle below us. And there’s a river at the bottom we must cross. Once we’ve done that we’ll find Odin’s fortress.”

“Good, not that far.” Jurgan grinned.

“Not far, but dangerous.” Troy looked down at the marauder leader. “I need a weapon as there are carnivores in there. Big carnivores.”

“No deal, asshole.” He snorted derisively. “You with a sword? You’d cut most of us in half before we could get a bullet in you.” Jurgan snorted. “You guide us, we’ll keep you safe. Got it?”

Troy stared down at the man. “You have no idea what really lives on this island, do you?” He began to laugh softly. “You should have stayed home.”

“Yeah, coming here was the worst thing that could happen... to you and your girlfriend.” He began to laugh. “Get moving.” He gave Troy a push but couldn’t budge him an inch.

Troy glared for a moment more, and then turned to lead them in.

“Stop.” Jurgan narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like you out at front as

you could just decide to lead us into a trap, and then just piss off into the jungle. Also, if anything happened to you, we've got no more guide."

Jurgan rubbed his chin, then turned to point to two men. "Oskar, Billa, front and center."

The two men came forward, both with faces creased with suspicion.

Jurgan grinned at the bedraggled-looking men. "You two just got promoted to being out at point. And make sure this big bastard doesn't run away on us."

Their mouths dropped open, and as they were about to complain, Jurgan bared his teeth and pushed Billa in the chest.

"Do as you're fucking told, and the sooner we get to our prize the sooner we're home and rich. Got it?" He glared, with his head jutted forward on his neck.

The men grumbled but walked a few paces to be out in front of Troy. Billa, the older one, looked at Troy and rolled his eyes.

"Sorted." Jurgan turned to Troy. "Now, you guide them, and you have your forward front as protection and as my leash on you."

Troy turned away and they then headed down into the dark valley. There was a path to follow which was more an animal track. Already the sound of insects and rustling in the foliage around him told him that life abounded in the jungles once again.

He had travelled in these lands before, but it had been with a band of warriors. He knew that some of Jurgan's group would not make it out the other side.

As he got closer to the bottom of the valley the light became almost totally shut out as the tree canopy blotted the weak silver glow from above. It got cooler and wetter and the curling mist snaking through the tree trunks added to an eerie, haunted feeling in the jungle.

And then it was like crossing a line as the jungle sounds stopped as if they had stepped into a vacuum.

"Stop," Troy said to the two men in front of him.

They halted immediately and spun to him, firstly, and then back to the jungle, expecting something to lunge out at them.

Troy cocked his head to listen, but there was nothing but a ghostly silence.

"What is it?" Jurgan came up behind him. "I don't hear nuthin'."

"Neither do I," Troy said. "And we should. There's something in there."

"Your fucking mormi?" Jurgan asked.

"*Morwi*. And no." Troy inhaled deeply in through his nose and smelled something sweet like plant sap or juice. He grunted.

"We're in something's territory," he said.

"For fuck's sake, you've been saying that every few hours." Jurgan

scowled. "Stop trying to spook the men." He exhaled exasperatedly. "Go forward or go around?"

"There is no way around," Troy said. "Just keep your eyes open."

Jurgan scoffed. "Like we haven't been doing that already." He turned to the two men out at front. "Oskar, Billa, get moving."

The two men grumbled and headed off again.

Troy followed them, wishing he had a weapon. He'd passed through this territory before and detected a hint of this odor. But had never seen the beast it came from. And he had never smelled it this strongly.

When he was with Yrsa she had stopped him and used the word '*Ormtongu wort*', which were ancient Norse words that might have meant something like worm-tongue plant but he had no idea what she was referring to.

She had made him pass through the land quickly, and only when they were long out of the darkest part of the jungle valley did she relax a little.

When he asked what the *Ormtongu wort* was, she simply said it was 'the swallower of men' and wouldn't talk of it again.

They continued walking with Troy trying to see everywhere at once. His skill in jungle craft had improved immensely after the years he had spent on Lemuria with Anne but he was still no match for animals that had evolved to be nearly invisible and hunt with senses far more acute than his human ones. And his huge frame and strength was also no match for some of the titans that lived in this land.

The smell was getting stronger, and he walked carefully now. Jurgan's men were strung out in a line that stretched back for about fifty to sixty feet.

Suddenly from behind Troy there was a yelp, and then some yelling. Jurgan stopped the men.

"What the hell is going on back there?" he shouted.

From down the line, one of the men shouted back. "It's Endor; he's gone."

Jurgan made a guttural noise in his throat and bullocked his way back through the line, while Troy watched as he was able to see over their heads.

"What do you mean he's gone?" Jurgan demanded. "You mean run away?"

"No, I don't think so." The man grimaced. "He was behind me, there was a yell, a gust of wind, and when I turned, he was just gone. Vanished, into thin air. *Gone*," he stressed.

Troy narrowed his eyes, looking at the jungle. That sweet smell again. He turned slowly; had something come out of those thick-padded fronds and vines to grab the man? It's what predators did –

wait for the line of prey animals to pass and then take out the weak, the young and old, or the stragglers.

As if in response, he heard a commotion from back at the front of the line and spun in time to see Oskar being lifted into the air, up into the tree branches.

He sprinted back, staring upwards, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

“Oh my god.” His mouth gaped.

This was what Yrsa had warned him about in this part of the jungle – *Ormtongu wort* – the worm-tongue plant. What held Oskar right now looked like a cross between a snake and a vine, as the arm-thick green tendril had dropped down from higher up in the canopy and wrapped around the man.

Finger-length thorns, like barbed hooks on the limb helped grip the man as he was lifted higher into the air. And it got worse – they had just blundered into a nest of them – as he watched, all around them more of the things unfurled from above.

Another thick vine swooped down and Troy dived, lying flat, and the vine caught another of Jurgan’s marauders, wrapping him up, as the man screamed in pain as the thorns penetrated his flesh, hooking him.

Troy had no sword, axe, or knife so all he could do was lay flat as another man was grabbed and this time he watched as the vine levered back up into the tree where it was reeled into something stuck to the massive tree trunk that resembled a huge, green blister.

As he stared, he saw the vine being pulled back into the massive lump of vegetation that bloomed open as the morsel of meat was brought closer, revealing a red mouth with even larger thorns like inward curving tusks – he could imagine what would happen; just like a Venus fly trap, the meat would be pulled in, the mouth snapped shut, puncturing the flesh of its prey animal to release the precious fluids, and then it would close as the victim would be trapped and slowly dissolved alive to fertilize the plant from within.

As the man vanished inside his weapons dropped from his body and rained down – a hand gun and machete. The gun was no good to Troy now as he would never be able to get one of his huge fingers through the trigger guard. But the three foot blade was something he could use.

He ran to it, and dived, scooping it up. But his sudden movement had attracted one of the vines, and as he came to his feet the hooked vine swung toward him.

Troy slashed sideways at the vine head, putting some muscle into the swing, and cleanly severed it where the three feet of end fell to the ground and frantically curled and uncurled like a worm left out in the

sun.

Troy had seen enough to know that the longer they stayed here, the more chance that every one of them would end up being taken.

“Run!” he yelled and began to sprint.

He passed by Billa who didn’t need convincing and was up and running hard, trying to stay close to Troy’s side.

Troy looked over his shoulder and saw the line of men following them in a crouching position. More vine heads came down, and two more men were lost, screaming up into the canopy, before they got out of the *Ormtongu wort’s* territory.

Troy continued to run them hard for the next fifteen minutes before he stopped them at a line of fern fronds and a grassy bank. The man fell gasping in huge breaths and Jurgan bent over with his hands on his knees.

Troy turned. “Remember when I said something was in there? And you asked what? Well, *that* was the something.” He stared hard. “Next time pay attention. And believe my words.”

Jurgan straightened. “You’re supposed to be our guide, and you walked us right into that trap.”

Troy held his arms wide. “You want another guide? Fire me and go and get one.”

Jurgan pointed his gun up between Troy’s eyes. “If there was another one, yeah, you’d be fired alright. If you know what I mean.”

His eyes went to Troy’s belt. “And you can drop that blade.”

“No,” Troy said. “If I had wanted to kill you, you’d be dead already. All of you.” He folded his arms. “I intend for you to get to Odin’s fortress. As long as my woman is your prisoner you have my word I will not flee or attack you.”

“I believe him,” Billa said. “He could have just pissed off when the plants attacked us, but he didn’t.”

Jurgan’s eyes narrowed. “One wrong move, you got it?” He holstered his gun. “How much further?”

Troy turned. “Just through here we should come to a river. It is dangerous and we will need to cross it.”

“Rapids?” Jurgan asked.

“No, dangerous because of what lives in it,” Troy replied.

Jurgan scoffed. “What a surprise.”

He turned to his remaining men. When they arrived he had about forty marauders. And now, he had just lost another five so was down to about fifteen or sixteen.

He turned back. “We’ve come this far. We go on.”

One of the men spoke up from the group who had been talking softly.

“Sir,” he said. “A few of the men have been talking.”

"Have they now, Mr. Orvin?" Jurgan waited.

"They say you can keep the gemstones, and the treasure. They just want to go home." Orvin shrugged. "This place is cursed. We've had enough."

"Cursed? I'll show you cursed." Jurgan pulled out his gun and shot the man in the chest. He fell back dead.

Troy went to lunge at Jurgan, but Billa grabbed his arm and shook his head.

"Don't. Please," he mouthed.

Jurgan held the gun loosely in his hand. "Like I said, we've come this far. We're not going back empty handed, got it? To ensure that happens, I need all of you." He glared.

Troy couldn't believe what he had witnessed and knew then that if this man could so easily kill his own people, he would have no qualms about killing Troy, Yrsa, and even their son. It was probably his plan all along.

Jurgan half-lifted the gin. "Are you with me, men?"

There was confirmation all round, though begrudgingly. Jurgan nodded. "Good." He holstered his gun and turned to Troy. "Take us to the river then. And keep your fucking eyes open this time."

It took them another hour before they heard the gurgle of rushing water. Troy slowed them down as Billa remained out at point and the man refused to walk more than two paces in front of Troy now. Perhaps he thought Troy would make a bigger target, or that Troy might defend him.

Troy couldn't help liking the older man. For some reason he reminded him of his long dead father. If his father hadn't bathed in years, let his hair grow, and a few of his teeth had fallen out.

Billa slowed down a little more until he was nearly beside Troy. "Have you ever been to Australia?" he asked.

Troy shook his head. "No, never been. I hear it's a long way. All the way down under, right?"

Billa grinned. "Yeah. My brother lives there." His mouth turned down and he nodded. "I'm going to sail there one day. Maybe the dragons never made it down there." He looked up. "What do you think?"

"It's as good a plan as any," he replied. "Say hello to your brother for me."

Billa grinned his gap tooth grin. "Thanks."

They threaded their way through a stand of large trees, broad palm leaves, and hanging vines to find the river running below them like it was in a green cave as the trees on both sides of the water met in the middle and cast a green glow down over the water.

Looking down, Troy saw it was fairly clear, but the water was moving just fast enough to distort the surface so it was hard to make out anything in its depths that he judged to be around twenty feet.

"That's moving too fast to swim, and we don't have a boat," Jurgan lamented.

"That's right," Troy replied. "But we don't go by boat." He pointed upwards. "We use the upper highways."

Jurgan looked up and followed the branches intertwining – their thickness meant they'd easily take a man's weight, and they could pass over the river without getting a drop of water on them.

"Yeah, sounds like a plan." He nodded as he looked at the canopy. "Is it safe?"

"No," Troy scoffed. "This is Lemuria, nothing and nowhere is safe here." He looked up but saw nothing dangerous for now.

"Better not be any fucking giant man eating plants up there," Jurgan warned.

"Lucky you have all the guns then." Troy laughed and turned away to look for the best way up and across. "There, and there. We climb this tree and use that thick branch. And hold the other one just above it like a railing."

He looked down into the river. Lemuria had too many land-borne predators to count, and the river and sea also held lots of terrors.

"Try not to fall in," Troy warned. "Being swept away and drowning would be the least of your problems."

"Billa, up you go," Jurgan said.

Billa cursed under his breath and Troy placed a hand on his shoulder and pointed out a few tips on how to climb and cross. The man thanked him, and then began to climb. Troy gave him a few feet head start and then started up himself.

The men followed one at a time and Troy stopped Billa when they were all up and standing, lined up, on the main branch. It was huge and about four feet across, so balance wasn't a problem. And as Troy had spotted, there was a chest high branch running parallel to it that allowed them to hold on and steady themselves.

Troy kept them moving and looked down into the water. He was sure he saw something shifting in the fast running stream but thought it might just be the dappling light on the huge, rounded boulders on the river bottom.

He looked up, just seeing snatches of the silvery light coming through the thick tree canopy that rose at least another eighty feet above them.

And then something moved fast across his vision. He thought it might have been the flying undertakers, and though they'd be too small to bother him, they'd pick the other men off without problem.

“Billa, down,” Troy urged.

The man didn’t need to be told twice and hunkered down in the crook of a cross branch to make himself as small as possible.

“What the fuck is this thing?”

Troy spun at the sounds of the men yelling behind him.

“Coming through.” Troy rapidly stepped over and around the men behind him. “Move it.” Up closer to the rear now, he saw the men at the back facing off with something that had landed on their branch. It was slightly bigger than the men, and looked to be heavily furred, strangely human-shaped, but enormously powerful.

“Is that a fucking ape?” Jurgan said, pointing his gun at it.

The thing was orange-hued like an orangutan, and it turned to Troy and he saw its pale features, strangely human-like, but with the huge jaw and teeth of a gorilla. However, the dark eyes were intelligent. And it just squatted on the branch making no move toward the men.

“Should I shoot it?” Jurgan asked.

“No, do nothing. For now,” Troy said and stared at the beast as it stared back.

He’d heard some of the clan stories about some Vikings that had gone feral. Thousands of years ago, they left everything behind and lived in the jungle as beasts. Maybe like Bromdin, they spent too much time near the iridium and became part berserker. This could be them, the missing tribe, he thought.

“What’s it doing?” Jurgan asked.

It had the hint of a curve to its mouth as if smirking. And Troy didn’t like it one bit.

“What’s it doing?” Troy looked around and saw more movement in the branches above them. “It’s damn distracting us. That’s what.” He pointed upwards. “Above us, attack.”

Dozens of the human-like gorillas moved through the trees on long powerful arms and scooped a few of the men off their perches with ease.

Troy knew that bands of chimpanzees sometimes hunted in the upper branches in jungles for fruit monkeys. They coordinated their attacks, driving their prey into a place where they could be captured. And then torn to pieces and devoured alive.

“Shoot, shoot!” Troy yelled.

One of the men ducked under one of the things, lost his balance and fell into the river. Almost immediately something surged to the surface that had obviously been watching the men cross over, and a huge shelled claw came up to pick him from the water’s surface and then submerge with its morsal of meat.

As Troy stared wide eyed, he saw more of those large round stones he had seen before begin jostling for the best position underneath

their branch.

They were crabs, at least twenty feet across and had obviously enjoyed getting their fill when things crossed over the highways above them and then fell. Or were pushed.

There came a scream from Billa, and Troy turned to see one of the gorilla men had landed close to the older man and grabbed him.

Troy ran half a dozen paces, lunged forward and grabbed the thing's leg just as it was launching itself into the upper branches while holding Billa close to its chest.

It shrieked, released Billa who fell to the branch and Troy shot out one long arm to grab the back of his trousers to stop him sliding off and into the water.

When Billa was centered, Troy turned his attention to the furious gorilla-like thing he clung to.

It grabbed at Troy's head as he wrestled with it. He found it enormously powerful, but Troy now oversized outmatched it, and when it found it couldn't overpower Troy the creature tried to bite him with its tusk-like teeth.

"Fuck off." Troy flung it off the branch and into the water below where it was immediately snapped up from below.

At the other end of the branch Jurgan had his gun out, as well as a few of the other men. They fired wildly and managed to hit several of the gorilla men, who also fell to the water to be dragged down. The loud gun sound was probably the biggest deterrent and obviously something the beast men had never heard before.

And in seconds they were gone.

Jurgan aimed his gun up into the upper branches, and then rounded on Troy.

"Fuck you. Fuck this place!" he screamed madly, while aiming a wobbling gun at Troy.

Troy froze, waiting for the shot.

"Save your ammunition," Troy said softly. "You may need it."

Jurgan, teeth bared, slowly lowered his gun, and Troy lowered his hands. He turned to hold out a hand to Billa who used it to get to his feet.

"Let's go," Troy said, and then spoke over his shoulder. "Before some other predator finds us. They'll be attracted by the noise."

He continued to walk along the branch and finish crossing the river.

CHAPTER 36

Yrsa sprinted into the clan village holding Stromson to her chest.

“Invaders!” she yelled.

She headed straight to the mothering hut and handed her son over for care. “Feed him. See to him.”

She kissed the boy’s head and then looked into his bewildered face. “Your father needs me.”

She turned and saw many of the Fjall warriors gathering along with a few of the elders. Already many were arming themselves.

She faced them. “Outsiders have come, they took us prisoner. Troyson has led them away. We must follow them.”

She yelled orders. Called for her battle armor and weapons. And then ordered a group of twenty of her most fearsome warriors to wear their strongest battle armor. And also to bring supplies and their drekka shields.

But before she could don the armor plating a healer began to work on her shoulder. The elder woman wiped away the ormarot root and cleansed the site with honey. Then she used a rough twine and needle to close the bullet wound for good. Fresh root salve was added, a bandage applied, and Yrsa rolled her shoulder, nodded approval, and then pulled on her armor.

“We go,” she said. “To Odin’s fortress.”

A few of the warriors glanced at each other, knowing what guarded that sacred place. But the chieftain’s orders were undeniable and unbreakable.

Yrsa began to jog, and the warriors followed – it would take them half a day to arrive if they ran the entire way, and there were many dangers along the way.

But she knew she would run through all the fires of Helheim for Troyson. And nothing would stand in her way.

CHAPTER 37

Troy led the remaining dozen men through the jungle. He began to recognize exactly where he was now and placed his feet carefully. He turned to put a finger to his lips.

In minutes more they arrived at a large clearing that sloped up toward the biggest tree any of them had seen in their lives.

Troy stared up at it – it was like a monstrous banyan, but as tall as a redwood, and in the grasp of its roots was an ancient stone building, built of titanic proportions, but now strangled by the tree itself.

Troy waved them down behind a line of fern fronds and Jurgan came up to crouch beside him.

“That’s it then, is it?” he asked.

“*Yggdrasil*. The tree from the beginning of time itself,” Troy whispered. “And held in its grasp is Odin’s fortress, built countless millennia ago. It was created to honor the god of gods.” Troy turned to him. “Inside is what you seek. And deserve.”

Jurgan’s brows came together as he stared up at it. “Is there someone in there? There’s a fire burning.”

“No, there is no flame.” Troy smiled. “I told you. There is a glowing ruby inside, huge, and it shines like trapped fire. The Vikings have worshipped and protected it for as long as they’ve been here.”

Troy looked back at the ancient structure. He knew the ruby he had first seen in the fortress had been removed. But someone, the Vikings, or maybe the dragon, had replaced it.

“And you’re just going to let us have it?” Jurgan’s eyes narrowed as he examined Troy’s face.

“No, if you want it, you have to take it. But there is a curse on all who would steal the heart of Odin from Lemuria.” He turned away. “I think the world outside is dealing with the results of that curse right now.”

“Bullshit.” Jurgan snorted and turned to his men. “Here it is boys, payday.” He faced Troy again. “You go first. Get moving.”

Troy shook his head. “It is forbidden for me to enter the home of the All-Father’s heart. You must go alone to retrieve it yourself.”

Jurgan growled. “Listen, I know a trap when I smell one. You take us in. If there’s a gem inside as you say, we’re all good. If not, you get a bullet. How does that deal sound?”

Troy half smiled. “Sounds like you’re a man who’s going to get everything he desires and more.”

Jurgan motioned toward the building. "You and your little buddy Billa can lead us in."

Troy turned to Billa. "Watch your step, there is a field of sticky pads and thorns that have poison tips. Tread carefully."

"Thank you," Billa whispered back.

Troy turned back to face the open ground and strode a few paces and saw the large flat pads that glistened with the sticky mucous over them that was like glue. He also spotted the vines running between the pads that had brutal-looking inch-long thorns, but they shouldn't bother his thick leather boots.

Troy headed in. His larger frame meant that placing his foot amongst the thorn canes was difficult, and Billa, to his credit, was heeding Troy's advice and walking slowly and carefully.

As they crossed the open ground, they saw the bones of animals and drying skins where things had become stuck and pricked by the thorns and died where they fell.

Jurgan was letting them get several dozen feet ahead like those poor saps who were ordered to head out first into a mine field.

"You'll get your woman back," Billa said from just behind him. "I'll help."

"Thank you." Troy half turned. "Why do you stay with Jurgan? He's insane."

"He is." Billa nodded. "But the entire world's gone to shit. I lost my woman, and my daughter in the dragon attacks." He sighed. "I was by myself for months. You either join a group, and live. Or you die."

Troy grunted.

"Losing your family is the worst thing that can happen to someone." He looked up at Troy. "I won't let you lose yours." He half smiled up at the huge Viking. "When Jurgan is gone, hopefully, we'll have a better leader."

"Thank you." Troy smiled back. "Now let's see if we can hurry Jurgan's departure along."

Jurgan and his men began to follow now, and Troy leaned closer to the man and lowered his voice. "When we are inside the fortress, stay behind me."

Billa looked at the building and then to Troy. "What's really in there?"

Troy's face grew grave as they approached a set of massive steps leading up to the ancient structure. "Your worst nightmare."

Behind him there was a cry of annoyance and he half turned to see one of Jurgan's men had stumbled and slipped sideways onto the vines.

"Fuck it." He pulled his hand back, blood showing on the palm.

He tried to get up but couldn't as he was stuck to one of the large

leaf pads. Troy watched, knowing what was about to happen. He'd seen it before.

The man stared at his palm, and then his eyes began to bulge. The red blood on his hand turned black and he began to gasp, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water. Next thing his hand followed by his arm blew up like a balloon and he fell back as his entire body now rippled and bloated for a moment, before splitting and bursting, its fluids spreading over the vine leaves. It then suddenly shrivelled like a pricked balloon.

"I warned you," Troy said to the men. "Watch it."

He turned away and soon made it to the huge first step. It was smaller than he remembered, mainly because now he was over nine feet tall, and he rested his hands in its surface. Billa found himself having to reach up to its top.

Troy climbed it, and lifted the man, and then climbed the next one. He waited then for the others to make it out of the vine field and begin to climb. Jurgan joined him and looked up at the other steps.

"Made for giants. Bigger than even for you." He snorted.

"No. Not made for men. Made for a god," Troy replied.

Jurgan wiped his streaming brow and drew in deep breaths. "Keep going, big fella. Nearly there." He motioned with his gun. "Up."

Troy continued to climb the last few steps, and as he did he felt the strange rays begin to bathe his body and tingle all the way to his back teeth.

He knew now that this was the source of his change, and he slowed as he reached the top step. He wondered again whether this weird radiation was the source of Bromdin's horrifying change.

Had to be, he thought. But there was no way he was going to let that happen to him. He'd stay well back from the devil's egg, as he thought of it now.

Troy got to the huge arched stone doorway and peered inside. He half smiled; here was where he thought his grand odyssey was culminating with the finding of the heart of Odin all those years ago. But in fact, it was only the beginning.

This cursed thing had drawn them here after he followed a legend, and what was loosed on the world was a plague of medieval proportions – a plague of monstrous beasts.

Jurgan and the others joined him, and Troy remained just outside the arched doorway and motioned with his arm. "Behold your treasure."

The man walked past Troy and stopped. "Fuck yeah." A huge smile split his face, and he headed in while Troy watched him.

The men followed and most had the faces of children that were walking into a funfair for the very first time, such was their delight.

The entire room, as well as the faces of the men, was bathed in the soft red glow from the pulsating light at its center. And scattered around it was the centuries of gathered treasure – huge tubs and chests overflowing with gold coins, cut stones, some raw and rough, and of every hue.

There was silver weaponry, armor, and jewelry that he assumed had been looted from the kingdoms of the known world at that time and offered up as tribute to the greatest Viking god, Odin.

Troy also saw the marks on the ground that had the desiccated sticks of bones jutting from their edges. He knew what they were. He'd seen it happen right before his eyes.

But once again, his gaze was drawn to the massive red stone on the plinth. Its glow throbbed with a life of its own, and even from this distance, he felt his back teeth aching, and his eyes watered like when you get too close to a fireplace and the heat dries your eyes out.

Troy watched Jurgan and a few of the men, trance-like, approach the huge blood-colored stone. He had seen the huge gems many times now, but he was still entranced by its beauty – the fantastic gem-like thing was smoothed and slightly oval and had a clarity that was breathtaking. But now he knew what it was, he couldn't think of it being anything else but an egg that would birth a miserable creature, and it revolted him.

When Jurgan was just six feet from the stone, trance-like, he lifted an arm and slowly reached out a hand. His face was lit by the red glow, and Troy saw that the big man's expression was one of rapture.

"It's beautiful," Billa whispered from beside him.

"It's not what you think it is," Troy replied.

Jurgan's eyes were wide, but they also watered with tears running down his cheeks. "Is it the gem doing that?" he asked.

"Yes it is. Can you feel it?" Troy said. "It is the power of a god."

"I can... I can *feel* it," Jurgan said, and then louder, "I can feel its power inside me."

Around the room Jurgan's men filled their pockets with coins and gems.

Jurgan then narrowed his eyes and walked slowly forward the last few feet toward the gem as if he was pushing through thick syrup and not air.

He squinted as he lifted his arms to the glowing gem and placed his hands on either side of it.

"Feels weird." He gripped it, and then lifted the gem.

As Troy expected as soon as he removed it from the plinth it stopped the pulsating heart-like throb and the glow faded away. However, as Jurgan held it aloft, it still held a shine all of its own.

He grinned like a child. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever

seen.”

Troy glanced back over his shoulder and back out at the jungle, but so far all was quiet. He turned back. “I was told that in one legend it says the heart stone fell from the sky.” He looked to Jurgan. “But the Vikings say it came from the mighty chest of the Old Father himself. And its pulsing glow is the beating heart.”

“Well, it’s mine now. Thank you, and fuck you, Odin.” Jurgan laughed out loud, and many of his men joined in. They too were becoming intoxicated by the riches.

Troy inhaled and smelled an overpowering stench settling over the room. The other men must have smelled the odor as well as they began to turn to look to each other and then the entrances and doorways, looking for the source of the foul smell.

Troy’s face was grim as he spoke softly. “No, it is you who will be fucked.”

Jurgan held the red stone aloft as he continued to show off the gem to his men who crowded around, holding bags of jewels, and gold.

Troy slowly reached out to lay a hand on Billa’s shoulder and gently pulled him back behind him.

“Be ready,” he whispered.

“What’s happening?” Billa sked.

“The devil is coming to claim its own.” Troy turned to Jurgan. “Is this what you truly desire, Jurgan?” Troy raised his voice. “Remember the curse. Sometimes when you wish too hard for what you want. The curse is, you get it.”

Jurgan frowned and spoke over his shoulder. “Fuck off.”

“As you wish.” Troy began to back out.

“No, no, no. That’s what you think.” Jurgan turned now and lifted his gun. “We still have a score to settle.”

Troy stopped, his eyes were half lidded as he stared back at the marauder leader. “We had a deal. You’ve got what you wanted.”

“Fuck the deal.” The man grinned like a death’s head. “This is for killing my men.” He fired.

Billa moved.

The report was loud in the fortress room, and Troy only had time to lift an arm, but Billa knew his leader too well, and was already leaping as the trigger was pulled. The older man took the bullet in the center of his chest.

He coughed blood and Troy lowered him to the ground, just holding his head up.

“I told you I would help.” Billa laughed softly through fits of bloody coughing. “You will see your woman again.”

Billa was struggling to breathe, and Troy knew his lungs were filling with blood. There was nothing he could do as the man’s chest

fell for the last time with a sound like a long, wet sigh. He eased Billa's head to the cold ground.

Just then, from behind and above, there was a sound like more coughing, wet coughing, and a recognizable stench filled the fortress.

Troy turned to see several of Jurgan's men holding their arms out and their heads and torsos covered in what looked like some sort of green, glutinous slime.

And here it comes, Troy thought.

First came the screaming, and as he watched, steam rose from the men and then the clothing slid from their bodies.

Troy had seen this before, but he was transfixed by the most agonizing thing he had ever heard or seen in his life.

The men held their hands up to stare at them or at their bodies as they turned blood red. Their long, unkempt hair slid away, followed by the skin sloughing off their hands first, and then in a ghastly scene that Troy would remember his entire life, their faces actually slid from their skulls.

The men were now just bones with eyes dissolved into empty sockets, but their agonized screams went on until their throats were also dissolved.

Troy clamped his teeth together to keep from vomiting as the men firstly collapsed as their bodies turned to a thick boiling mush with a few sticks for bones protruding. Just like in the other long-dried piles.

Jurgan and a few of the other remaining men that had escaped the drekka's initial spray stared with eyes almost bulging from their heads and mouths hung open.

Jurgan turned to Troy with a question on his face.

Troy slowly looked up, and then pointed to what was looming over them. He shared a grim smile with Jurgan as he backed out. "Your curse has arrived." Troy grinned. "Meet the true ruler of Lemuria."

Jurgan followed his finger and screamed.

The dragon was bigger than any Jurgan had ever seen on the mainland and was a mountain of muscle and scales that were each bigger than the doorframe. And those scales were covered in moss and other strange growths as if the dragon-like beast was as ancient as the island itself. Wicked spikes and spines rose from its back and head, and each claw was nearly the size of a fully grown man.

Glowing eyes like twin pits of hell fixed on the men, and especially Jurgan holding the gem.

Just before Troy backed out of the room, he paused. "Don't let it take your treasure. Fight for it." He laughed as he turned and bounded down the steps.

Troy heard gunfire ring out, which against the titanic beast would have not even been an annoyance to it. He looked over his shoulder

and saw Jurgan and his remaining men get to one of the arched doorways, but when they tried to exit through it, the dragon thumped down a huge foot, covering the entrance.

Troy ran, and as he did he heard the screams of fear at first, then the screams turned to one of agony, and even from where Troy was he could smell the scalding flesh. He only hoped that the drekka would be satisfied.

But it obviously wasn't.

Troy had to carefully pick his way back through the thorns and sticky leaf pads, and before he was even half way, the dragon lifted above the fortress walls, and its large yellow eyes saw the large form of Troy still in the center of the thorn plain. The great beast came over the stone wall top like a river of scales, spikes and teeth the size of saplings.

"Shit." Troy turned to flee, trying to make it to the thick jungle. It was his only chance.

Troy ran, arms out, like a tightrope walker, to keep from falling into the venomous plants. But he could feel the ground shaking beneath him, and then the foul breath of the beast that stunk of the recently melted flesh of Jurgan and his men blew past him.

Troy knew he'd never make it to the line of large fern fronds and tree trunks, and just as one huge clawed foot thumped down beside him, throwing him off balance, his foot became stuck fast to one of the large sticky pads. He ripped his foot free, but it tore the sole from his boot, leaving him amongst the vicious thorns with a bare foot.

He tried to continue hobbling forward, but began to wonder if a fairly quick, but painful, death from the poisonous thorns, might be preferable to being melted alive, and then sucked up like soup.

The drekka loomed closer, bringing its huge head nearer to the ground beside him, easily keeping pace with the Viking. Troy saw that its yellow eyes seemed to glow with a hunger or perhaps enjoyment of the feast to come. It was toying with him now.

He saw the monster's throat shiver.

This is gonna hurt, he thought and uselessly threw an arm up, and also screwed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, waiting for the excruciating liquid death to wash over him.

"Odi-iiin!"

Troy turned at the voice and saw Yrsa and a group of warriors charging across the plain of thorns, throwing long-shafted war spears as they came, and holding the heavy, squared shields by their sides.

They were nothing more than morsels to the great beast, and he knew their attack was doing little more than buying him a few more seconds. While sacrificing themselves.

"Stop!" he yelled to Yrsa and threw a hand up flat toward her and

the warriors.

Yrsa ignored him and was at his side in an instant. "You think I'm going to let you leave again?" She pulled her long silver-flecked sword. "Trying to get to Valhalla without me? That will not do, Troyson Strom."

The twenty warriors joined her, and one of the men with supplies tossed Troy a spare boot, which he quickly dragged on. Then, just as he stood upright, the dragon shivered again and with a cough, spat a stream of its caustic saliva directly at them.

Troy now saw why the shields were called 'drekka shields' as the warriors immediately locked the large square plates together in front of Yrsa, Troy and themselves.

The wave of molten spit washed over them, and a few yelled in pain as some droplets splashed them – one of them being Yrsa.

Odinvar fell from her hand as she growled through clenched teeth as her forearm blistered. As well, the warriors had to discard their shields as before their eyes the thick wood and steel was smoking and falling to pieces.

And now they were exposed.

The warriors drew their swords and axes again and surrounded the queen and war counsellor. None retreated a single step.

The dragon seemed to delight in the bigger meal presented to it. There was no hope for them, and Troy was in awe of these brave people and their unflinching sacrifice in the face of a gruesome death they must know was coming.

But there was one chance.

The drekka began to loom closer, and Troy picked up Odinvar, the sword of Odin, from where Yrsa had dropped it. The long silver-flecked sword was also called the dragon slayer. And now was the time to find out if the legend was true.

"Stay back!" he yelled to the Vikings and pushed through their ranks.

"No!" Yrsa yelled.

The huge mouth lowered, and Troy looked up into the horrifying vision of the hellish beast opening a cavern-wide mouth.

Its huge body, lumped with muscle, spines and spikes, leaned forward, and Troy didn't wait for the shower of acidic bile but ran at it as it was sucking in breath. Its maw now hung open and ready.

He sprinted hard, leapt, and jammed the sword into the open mouth, avoiding the near impenetrable scales around the lips and catching the gum near a front tooth. The heat from the throat's depths singed him, but the needle-tipped sword sunk deep.

Troy expected the pinprick to do little more than annoy the beast, but instead it recoiled backwards, and rose up. It swiped one

redwood-sized forearm across its mouth dislodging the sword, but with the mouth still hanging open, Troy watched as the tooth whose base he had skewered fell to the ground as around it the gum became black and rotted.

"The sword of Odinvar," Yrsa yelled and pointed up at the dragon. "Drekka, hear us; you are not the most powerful thing here anymore."

Black, corrupted ooze still fell from the drekka's mouth as it turned, and bullocked its way back toward the jungle near the fortress and it smashed huge boulders and trees out of the way until it soon vanished.

Troy went and recovered his sword, and then squatted by the four foot-long front smaller tooth that had fallen free. Even as he watched, its base continued to soften.

The Vikings crowded around, cheering, and suddenly delighted to not be burned down to bones and melted flesh.

Yrsa ran her fingertips along the silver-flecked blade and looked at the black blood on her fingers. "Drekka poison," she said softly.

Troy stood and turned to her. "You foolish woman. You could have been killed."

Yrsa, instead of being admonished, reached out to grab his long black hair and pulled him toward her to stare into his face. "Says the warrior who just jumped into a drekka's mouth." She pulled him closer to kiss him hard.

She let him go. "And I would die a hundred times for you." She smiled. "And I know you would for me."

He smiled and nodded. "Some things are too valuable to lose." He handed her back the sword. "It seems some legends are true."

She looked at the blade and at the dark blood on its tip. "The true drekka killer is the sword..." she looked at Troy and smiled adoringly, "...and the strong arm that wields it."

"We need more of this weapon's steel. More drekka poison." He looked at each of the men. "And I know where it is."

They made their way to the jungle edge, where Troy and Yrsa's wounds were treated with the ormarot root, and he was given a proper pair of boots, slightly too small for his huge body now, but better than traversing a primordial jungle in bare feet.

Troy stretched aching muscles and shook away the tiredness in his limbs. Their job wasn't done yet. "Now to visit another legend. The *Krystall vatn*. The Crystal lake."

He led them out.

CHAPTER 38

Troy threaded his way back through the heavy jungle, taking Yrsa's band of warriors with him.

"Not many animals. Still," Yrsa said.

Troy nodded. "There are some, small. But they all will return. If we hadn't stopped the ravaging morwi, they would have eaten every animal. Then the plants, and left Lemuria nothing more than a barren lump of rock."

"Let's hope they're sealed in far below the earth," Yrsa said.

"But we must be eternally vigilant in the chance they return. And in greater numbers," he replied. "Unlike the worker and warrior morwi, who were like mindless drones, the queen was intelligent, and that meant it, she, was capable of planning and scheming. And also capable of hatred, and perhaps a desire for revenge."

"Then I'm glad the sword of Odin didn't kill the drekka." She tilted her head to him. "It seemed the only thing strong enough to stand against the morwi was the drekka."

He half smiled. "We stood against both the morwi and the drekka."

"We did," she replied. "With you at my side, I would stand against Fenrir himself." She grinned up at him and tugged his hair again.

"Hey." He laughed. "Easy on the hair, you'll pull it out."

She nudged him. "Aw, my big strong, war counsellor." She threw an arm around his neck, having to reach up to do it.

He laughed; even though he was still battered and bruised he felt better than he had in years.

She turned to him, brows raised. "How did you find the *Krystall vatn*? It is a place lost for too many lifetimes to count. And you return and find it so quickly?"

Troy nodded, feeling a pang of loss. And perhaps guilt. "Luck, I guess. I led a band of outside world villagers here. We found the lake by accident hidden behind a wall of thorns, and because it seemed so secure I left them there. They should have been safe."

"Has something happened to them?" Her forehead creased.

"Yes, the morwi happened to them." He sighed as his buoyant spirits sank. "I saw many of their bodies in the morwi nest." He remembered seeing their small bodies stacked like meat in a larder. Which is exactly what they were. "I thought I was keeping them safe. But instead I was trapping them for the insect hordes."

"It is not your fault. How could you know the morwi were loose

again?" She put a hand on his shoulder.

He nodded, but the feeling of guilt refused to leave him.

The group walked on in silence for the next few hours. Troy also felt grief for the old man, Oder, and was dreading seeing the village just full of ghosts.

It took them half a day to arrive at the barrier that surrounded the hidden place, and Yrsa and the warriors stood with hands on hips looking up at the mighty wall of twisted thorns rising into the sky before them.

"I have passed close by to this area before," she said. "Never did I think there was something behind this obstacle." She turned. "I thought these vines were just growing over bare rock."

Troy nodded. "Maybe it grew around the lake after Odinvær visited here. Or was always here and he and the first great clan found the place by chance. A place that was safe from predators." He turned back to the thorns. "Well, most of them."

She turned. "And the mystical lake is in there? Hidden. Is it true what the legend says about it?"

He nodded. "Yes, and it's magnificent. Clean and clear as the morning air. And it heals wounds." He grabbed her scalded and bandaged arm and lifted it. "I look forward to bathing your wounds." He let her arm drop. "We go first."

Yrsa turned to her warriors. "Wait here. Rest, we'll be back soon."

She turned back to him, waiting, and he smiled at the statuesque woman with the black war paint stripe across her eyes, armored breastplate that was pitted by the dragon spit, and twisted into her long white braids, bones, iron runes, and plants.

"Maybe we need to bathe the rest of you." He laughed softly.

She raised her eyebrows. "You have obviously not looked at your own reflection for a while, Troyson Strom." She elbowed his stomach and walked along the wall of twisting thorn canes for a moment, before turning one way, then the other, and then back to him. "There is no gate or doorway. How do you get inside without cutting a hole?" she asked.

"Like this." Troy got down on his belly. "Follow me."

He began to worm his giant frame through a small hole. It took him many minutes and he stopped to check that Yrsa was following him. Satisfied, he continued, and this time didn't spike himself too much.

As soon as he emerged, he smelled the formic acid scent. Yrsa stood.

"The morwi," she said from just behind him.

He knew they were already dead but couldn't help jogging toward the village.

“Caution, Troyson,” Yrsa called from behind him.

He arrived quickly and as expected, found it empty. The small makeshift huts were there, the remains of a central fire had burned down to ash. And peering inside some of the huts, he saw food utensils laid out, and clothing, but no one anywhere.

He knew it was futile, but he ended up searching every hut and they were all the same. Nothing but ghosts.

Yrsa, who was just outside the village, was looking down at the ground. She pointed at a patch of dirt.

“Here,” she said.

He joined her and saw the sharp little imprints of the morwi.

“Some are deeper than others. Means they were heavier.” She looked up at him. “Because they were carrying something.” Her mouth turned down. “I’m sorry for them.”

He nodded and sighed. “I knew, but I just hoped...”

Troy sat on the ground feeling miserable, and Yrsa crouched beside him, and put an arm around his shoulders. “They are gone.”

He stared at the ground. He should have known better. The thorn cage around the crystal lake was near impenetrable for all manner of deadly beasts. But for the morwi, it provided them with a small herd of soft animals that couldn’t get away. He had brought them here to get away from the marauders, and instead fed them to monsters.

Troy held his head in his hands as anger infused his mind and body.

“I did this,” he seethed.

“Don’t think that,” Yrsa urged.

He shook his head. “I did it, I did it, I did it.” His frustration and anger boiled over and he threw his head back and roared to the sky beyond the heavy entwined thorn cage bars above.

Just as his scream was dying away, he heard something.

“Troy.”

He jumped to his feet, turning one way then the other. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Troy.”

“Yes, a voice.” Yrsa was looking off toward the east. “That way.”

“The lake,” Troy said.

He began to run, leaving the small village and heading for the crystal lake with Yrsa on his heel. It only took him minutes, but as they emerged from the forest surrounding it, he saw the small boy sitting on a large flat stone about fifty feet from the bank, hugging himself from the cold.

Yrsa skidded to a halt, staring at the water. “The lake.” She began to walk slowly toward it.

“Ollie!” Troy shouted.

Troy sprinted the last few feet and launched himself out in a long

dive, swimming the short distance in seconds.

As he emerged up onto the stone, Ollie leapt on him, and Troy grabbed him.

"You're safe now," Troy said, as Ollie babbled incoherently.

"I'm taking you in. Hold on." Troy put the kid over his back and Ollie wrapped his arms around Troy's trunk-like neck. He then breaststroked back to the bank.

He felt the boy shivering and his body temperature was about that of a frog. As they emerged from the water, Troy held him and ran back to the village.

"Who is that?" Yrsa asked.

"A survivor," Troy replied.

Ollie had his eyes screwed shut and his teeth chattered. Troy entered one of the cabins and found a blanket and wrapped it around him.

"You're alive. Thank god." He dried Ollie's hair.

"Big ants." Ollie sniffed. "They came."

Yrsa was quickly gathering sticks and tinder. She placed them in the village's central fire pit and used a flint to light the small pyre. In a few minutes she had a small blaze going and Troy sat the boy in front of it.

Ollie opened his blanket to let the warmth touch his chest. He closed his eyes and looked about to drop into a deep sleep. Troy could understand it, as the kid probably never let himself go into a deep sleep for fear of falling in the water and drowning. Or waking to find the morwi had somehow made it out to him on his rock.

"How long?" Troy asked gently. "How long ago did they come? How long were you out there?"

Ollie blinked a few times before looking up. "Days, I think. They came three days ago. I couldn't save them. The big ants stung them and they all fell down. They were screaming." He sobbed. "Then they were carried away." He wiped one of his cheeks with the blanket and then stared into the fire as he relived it. "I ran to the lake and dived in. I breathed through a reed like you showed me until the ants went away. But I was too scared to come back."

Troy put his arm around the boy. "They've gone now. Hopefully for good."

"All my friends are gone," Ollie said in a small voice. And then, "Anna? *Anna!*?" His eyes were wide. "Did you see her? I think they took her too. I saw her long hair, but I couldn't get to her." Ollie grabbed Troy's arm. "Will we go and get them? Save them?"

This is going to hurt, Troy knew. "No." He sighed. "Listen, Ollie. Those big ants, they're called morwi. I've seen inside their hive," Troy said softly. "After three days with the morwi, they would not be alive."

Not someone that size. Mercifully, the stings probably killed many of them immediately.”

“And the ones that weren’t killed immediately?” Ollie pressed. “You can save them. You can save anyone.”

“Sorry, Ollie. Not this time.” Troy shook his head slowly. “They’re not coming back.”

Ollie’s brows came together as he looked away for a moment. He spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. “What happens to me then?”

“You come with me to the village,” Troy replied.

“Your village? The Viking village.” He brightened. “Will I become a Viking?” he suddenly let his eyes slide to Yrsa. “Is that the queen?”

“Yes.” Troy smiled. “Why don’t we ask her if you can come.” He turned to Yrsa. “He wants to know what happens to him. I said I’d ask your permission to come to the clan of Fjall village.”

“He’s very small.” Yrsa nodded and smiled. “But I will allow it.”

“She said yes,” Troy replied. “And they promise not to eat you.”

Troy grinned, but then saw the boy’s expression, and after what he just told him about the morwi, and his friends, he regretted the dumb joke.

Ollie’s eyes slid to Yrsa again. He leaned toward Troy. “Is that your girlfriend who you came back for?”

Troy nodded.

“I knew it,” Ollie replied sagely. “She’s beautiful.”

Troy turned to Yrsa. “He said he thinks you’re beautiful.”

Yrsa chuckled. “Tell the little bug I’m spoken for.”

Troy turned to Ollie. “She said, thank you.”

Ollie nodded, and then seemed to think on something for a moment before looking up at Troy. “Are there any others like me, I mean, as small as me, in your village?”

“No, but you’ll be under my protection. You’ll have a lot to learn. And I can teach you.” He rubbed the boy’s head. “First up, you’ll need to be able to speak old Norse.”

“And will I learn to fight dragons? Like you do?” Ollie got to his feet.

“Perhaps. But there’s only one dragon here.” Troy also rose. “And to that end, I need to retrieve something. And you can help.” Troy held up a finger. “After you’ve had a hot meal and got dry clothes on. Deal?”

Troy, Ollie, and Yrsa spent the next twenty minutes searching the empty huts for food, and things Ollie may need for his new life, and placed them in a bag at the center of the village.

Troy found some dried fish and large berries and gathered up enough for a meal for the three of them.

As they ate, Yrsa raised her eyebrows. “The boy still stares at me.”

Troy grinned. "He's never seen a woman like you." He tilted his head. "But I remember, I stared at you as well. I still do."

She smiled. "You stare at me with lust. He stares at me as if I'm some sort of *niten*."

Troy laughed, knowing the word meant a strange or unknown creature.

When they finished Troy stood and wiped his hands. "There's a few more things for us to gather before I enter the lake."

"You're going back in there?" Yrsa frowned. "I do not like this."

"I'll be fine." Troy quickly searched the huts and found what he needed in Oder's hut. It was a leather bag he had brought with him from the outside world.

It was large, strong, and just what he needed. He also took several of the longest lengths of rope he could find and tied them all together.

When done, the trio headed out to the lake, and once at the bank Troy got his bearings as he looked out over the clear expanse of water that shimmered a soft blue.

Yrsa stopped. "It's beautiful." She lifted her arms to it. "The legend has it that Odinvarg, the first great king to unite all the clans of Lemuria, found it, and bathed in it. After doing so he was said to have become immortal. After many lifetimes, he vanished one day, and never returned."

Troy nodded. "It's where I found his sword." He pointed. "Out there. Towards the center is a hole in the bottom of the lake that leads to a large cave. With air in it."

Ollie looked up at Troy. "Can I...?"

"No, not this time," Troy replied. "I need you here to look after and protect Yrsa."

Ollie briefly looked up at the towering, physically imposing woman. "Oka-aay," he said skeptically.

Troy handed Ollie one end of the long rope, knowing it was really for Yrsa. "I need to recover something. Something heavy. Once I tie it off, together we can drag it along the lake bottom and up. Might need a few trips. Can you do that?"

Ollie nodded half-heartedly, but then stopped and looked around. "But, the ants, *um*, morwi..."

"The dragon attacked the morwi nest and buried them. They won't be back. At least not for many years and we'll be ready for them then. Besides, you'll be safe with Yrsa."

Troy noticed the boy still looked uncertain, and guessed after his ordeal he had a right to be nervous. "Look, if there's any danger, tug on the rope, and I'll come right back up, okay?" Troy watched the boy's face as he thought it over.

He looked up at the towering form of Yrsa who just raised an

eyebrow back at him, as she didn't understand their conversation, but knew she was part of the topic.

After a moment, Ollie shrugged. "I guess so."

"Good." Troy turned back to the glass-still, pellucid water to try and get his bearings.

"You're going to swim out there?" Yrsa snorted softly. "I would go with you, if I could swim."

He nudged her arm. "Then that's something on my list to teach you." He pointed. "I think the underwater cave is about two hundred feet out where the water darkens a little. It's the deepest point in the lake. Inside the cave is more weapons that can poison the drekka. We might need them in the future."

She nodded and bent to the water and cupped her hand scooping some up. She sniffed at it, and then drank. "Beautiful." She stood. "I will make sure this place is always a secret."

"There's one thing to do first." He held out a hand.

She took it, but her brow creased, and she resisted. "I can't swim."

"Not to swim. Take off your armor and weapons," he said. "And your bandages."

She did as he asked, also taking the wrapping off her arm, displaying the angry, blistered skin. After a moment she was standing there just in her worked animal hide skirt that was like pleated belt straps over her muscular thighs. Above, she was magnificently bare breasted.

Ollie's eyes widened and he turned away, blushing.

Troy led her into the water where it was only about five feet deep. "Bathe. Cleanse your wounds."

She slowly went under to her neck. And then all the way under, staying down for a few seconds. She came up and tilted her head back letting the water run from her hair and face, and then moaned in delight.

She opened her eyes and looked at her blistered arm. Right before them, the blisters became less red. And then in moments more they seemed to vanish.

"This place has Odin's magic in it," she said.

"And now for some more of Odin's magic." Troy helped her up onto the bank.

He turned back to the water, and adjusted the leather bag over his shoulder. "Here goes."

"Troy..." Yrsa began.

"Be careful," Ollie said over the top of her.

He half turned and smiled. "Always."

He waded a few feet further out, feeling the chill of the cool water, then dived forward and began to swim. Once he was out to where he

wanted to be, he sucked in a huge breath, and dived down.

He swam down to the bottom, and then along the sand that was threaded with gently waving streamers of emerald-green water plants. He circled for a while before spotting the cave mouth. He quickly returned to the surface, sucked in more air and went back down.

He then scooted inside the cave, using the rocks to propel himself faster. As he went along the tunnel-like cave, he was glad to see there were no real snags on the bottom for what he had planned.

It only took him a few minutes to come up inside the cave cavity, and surfacing, he wiped his face. He immediately saw his goblet, but the glow worms had all vacated. He launched himself out of the water, grabbed it and went to one of the walls to refill it with the luminous worms.

“Just need to borrow you guys again. Won’t be long, promise.” In seconds more he once again had his torch and he walked to where the wall images and chest were and stopped before them.

The treasure still spilled out over the floor, and he sighed and shook his head at the magnificent objects amongst it. Years ago, wealth like this had driven him to find the hidden, mysterious island. And he marveled at what some of the items would have been worth just from their historical antiquity value. Or at least would have been worth before the entire world was lost.

He walked on past the gold and jewels and saw the weaponry, many pieces now rotted and corroded, but on a piece of carved stone plinth was a massive, short-handled hammer. He went to it and gripped it.

Troy tried to lift it but couldn’t. He tried again with all his might but saw that the weapon or tool didn’t budge a fraction of an inch.

“Must have become bonded to the stone,” he whispered, with even his soft voice echoing in the dark cavern.

He left the hammer, turned away and lifted the goblet higher and saw there was a change in the wall – what he thought previously was just the rocks was actually something hanging there. He went to it and reached out a hand, and as his fingers alighted on it, the material or animal hide fell to dust revealing an alcove, and within it a seated skeleton.

Troy held up the goblet, staring in at the skeleton seated on a carved throne of rock. The skeleton had one hand on an axe handle, and the other balled into a fist resting on a skeletal thigh.

He read the inscription along the top. “Here sits mighty Odinvar, killer of drekka, and the first great ruler of the kingdom of Lemuria.” He half smiled and lowered the goblet close to the skeleton’s grinning visage. “I guess you’re not immortal after all.”

Troy bowed in deference to the ancient king. He saw the man’s

robes were just mold-ridden fragments that stuck to the ribcage and bony shoulders. The weaponry, beside him and across his lap, was dust-covered but still looked strong. And sitting on the top of the skull was a golden crown with all manner of gems pressed into it, and a huge blue sapphire at its front carved into the shape of a dragon's head.

Troy reached out to lift it free. "The new ruler of Lemuria will wear this nobly, and honor your legacy, Odinvar." He held it closer to the goblet. "And the center stone will match her eyes."

He was staring down at the magnificent crown when he heard soft movement. He looked back at the skeleton and stared.

Had it moved slightly from before?

He kept watching for a moment more before beginning to turn away. The movement again, and this time when he turned back he was sure the skull had rotated slightly to now look directly at him with its hollow eye sockets.

"You're not immortal, Odinvar," he said softly. "Rest now."

Then Troy noticed that the fist that had been balled on the thigh bone was now open, and in its center sat a small object.

"You want me to have that?" He crossed to it and smiled. "Okay."

He lifted the small thing close to the glowing goblet, examining it, and then stuck it in his pocket. Troy then hooked the crown to his belt and then backed out of the alcove to leave the great ruler in peace.

He went to the rotted chest and quickly loaded the spear tips into the leather bag. There were twenty of them, and with them all loaded the bag was heavy, he estimated at around three hundred pounds.

For someone of Troy's size and strength it was not overbearing but might have caused a problem trying to surface with them. He just hoped the handles didn't break as he tied the rope end to them.

He carried the bag to the water, took one last look around, and then dumped the glow worms out onto the cavern floor.

"Thanks, boys."

He went back to the pool edge, drew in a deep breath, and dropped into the entrance hole. He didn't swim this time as the weight of the bag meant he was able to walk along the bottom, and as he exited the cave mouth he left the bag at the entrance and surfaced. He breached, sucking in huge breaths of cool air.

He quickly turned to see Yrsa and Ollie waving wildly and giving him the thumbs up as though he had been gone a week. He guessed they were relieved, and so was he; even though he didn't expect there to be danger, he was happy to see them both safe.

He saw Yrsa was holding the rope end and Troy swam quickly to the shore, and as he did, Yrsa began to drag on the rope.

She grunted, her long muscles straining, "What do you have there,

Troyson, a baby drekka?"

He went to help her, but she batted him away. "I can do this."

Soon the heavy bag came up onto the bank.

Ollie rushed to it and helped Yrsa drag it the last few feet to them. He opened it and peered inside but was immediately disappointed with the dull looking spear tips.

"Aw, that's it?" He let the bag sides drop.

"Yep, that's it. Made of a special material that's poisonous to dragons." Troy reached in to lift one out. He held it out to Yrsa.

Yrsa took it from him and turned it in her fingers. "Now we have our own teeth." She nodded to Troy. "To bite back at any drekka who bother us."

"What's that?" Ollie had spotted the gleaming object tied at his waist.

Troy took it off his belt and lifted it. "The crown of Odinvar; the first great ruler of all the clans of Lemuria."

He walked up to Yrsa and placed it on her head. "For the rightful queen of Lemuria." He stepped back and bowed.

Yrsa smiled broadly and felt it with both hands, repositioning it slightly. She then looked one way, then the other, and then rushed to the water's edge to lean over and look at her reflection.

"Beautiful," she whispered.

Troy nodded. "Odinvar would approve," he said. And then, "He was down there, Odinvar. He's been sitting on this throne in the water-cave for thousands of years amongst his treasure."

"Was he...?" Her eyes widened.

"No, he wasn't alive. But I felt his spirit was still there. Still watching over us." He nodded. "I sensed it was a good feeling."

"Wow," Ollie said through an open-mouthed grin.

"Oh yeah, and he gave me something for you too." Troy reached into his pocket for the small thing and handed it over.

Ollie took it, and his mouth dropped open as he stared at it.

"So cool," he whispered.

It was a silver ring, and on its surface it had a raised dragon, in the stylized image of the old Norse snarling dragons.

Ollie tried it on, but it was so big it went over two of his fingers.

"You'll grow into it," Troy assured him.

"I don't care. I love it now." Ollie made a fist and held it up. "Odin."

Yrsa rolled her eyes and smiled.

Ollie slowly lowered his hand. "I just wish I could show it to Anna."

"I'm sure she's watching over you." Troy placed a hand on his shoulder.

Yrsa looked back out to where Troy had dived down. "Troyson,

perhaps when you teach me to swim, one day you will take me down there to visit Odinvær and pay my homage.”

“Yes, I will,” he said and looked about, and then decided the time was right. “We need to go home now.”

“Home?” Ollie asked.

“My home. Your home. The Viking village,” he replied. “Just one thing.” He smiled down at the kid. “There will be school.”

“Aww...” Ollie’s lip curled.

Troy laughed. “You need to speak the language and learn the writing. But you’ll also learn to hunt, fish, take weapon practice.”

Ollie brightened. “Yeah, okay.” He then seemed a little uncertain. “Will they... like me?”

“Maybe. And maybe not at first.” Troy smiled down at the small boy. “But bear in mind that they didn’t like me at first, and now I’m their war counsellor. And...” He thumbed over his shoulder at Yrsa. “My girlfriend is the queen. So hang in there.”

The kid beamed up at him.

“Grab your stuff,” Troy said and hefted the heavy bag of spear tips. “We have a long way to go.”

At the thorn wall, Ollie reached out and grabbed Troy’s hand to stop him.

“Are you sure the, ah...?”

“Morwi?” Troy waited.

Ollie nodded. “Morwi ants. Are you sure they’re all gone?”

Troy hoped so, but he remembered Anne telling him that the giant insects were clever enough to have many exits in their hives and he had no idea just how big those labyrinths were below the ground.

He just hoped the dragon managed to bury the queen and buy them some time. A few years at least.

“They’re buried,” he said. “We either won’t see them for years, or maybe we won’t see them ever again.”

“Good.” Ollie’s mouth turned down as he nodded. “I hate them. And if they are only buried, I hope something bad happens to them.”

“Me too.” Troy thought about the old man, Oder, and all the villagers lost. “Me too.”

CHAPTER 39

The morwi queen remained in the deep chamber hundreds of feet below the earth, hidden at the end of twisting labyrinths in the stygian dark tunnels.

Many of the chambers had been collapsed as the drekka had dug for them, but the queen was too deep to be found. The hundreds of workers and soldiers she had retained would tend to her needs and the new eggs would serve as little more than food for now.

There was also many of the still warm bodies of the captured biped creatures and that delicacy would be reserved for the queen alone.

She knew time was on her side as the hive was eternal. She would wait years before ordering her workers to begin tunnelling back to the surface. The animals would have repopulated the land, and many would have forgotten the scent and sting of the morwi. Even the bipeds.

As the hulking queen squatted in the darkness, a tingle began in her head, then moved to the place between her eyes. In the darkness the near blind worker and soldier ants could not see the strange growth that sprouted there as the cordyceps fungus lifted a polyp stem from her skull carapace. It was already invading her body, and brain, and it would order her to remain still in the hive while it consumed all the meat it found inside her body, eventually leaving her nothing but an empty shell.

But first it had one important task; and that was to capture *all* the ‘meat’ of the other ants.

The polyp lifting on a stalk from her head swelled like a balloon flower and then burst open showering the hive in a fine, powdery dust of spores that rained down on the unwitting giant insects.

In a few weeks the entire hive would be nothing more than a web-like network of cordyceps fungus as the empty exoskeletons would be deformed and burst open having sprouted their own fungal blooms.

It seemed the hive wasn’t eternal after all. But the fungus was.

CHAPTER 40

The Fjall clan village turned out for the returning war party led by Yrsa with her war counsellor at her side.

In addition, the Aegir, the Stonwar, and the far Mortag clans had sent emissaries as word had spread of the ruler that had defeated the morwi, sent the drekka fleeing from them, and now wore the ancient crown of Odinvær.

Perhaps some had come to challenge, but one look at the huge form of the dark-haired Troyson Strom, carrying the sword of Odin, and in his long blood-colored cloak, or they heard the whispered stories of his prowess in battle, and any plans of a challenge instead turned to ones of joining with Fjall.

There would be feasting tonight, and all the clans had brought food for roasting, hops and barley for making the strong beers that would be consumed by the jug load. And there would be dark breads smeared with the sap of the yordan stem, that was like a form of sugar cane.

Yrsa had brought Stromson over, and Troy saw the blue watch face still hanging around his neck. He wondered briefly what his long dead father would think or could he have ever imagined where his son, Troy, would end up when he handed the small dark-haired boy the watch all those years ago.

Yrsa held Stromson out to Troy and he took the small boy in his hands and stared into a face that had his blue-grey eyes and coal black hair.

He kissed the boy's forehead, and lifted him high, throwing him up and catching him. The boy bumbled and laughed in a way that made all fathers feel like they are immortal.

"He will be the mightiest Fjall to ever live," Yrsa said.

"All our children will," Troy replied.

"All our..." her brow furrowed for a moment, before her eyes lifted to his, and he saw the steam in them as she understood.

She handed Stromson over to the nursing maid, and took Troy's hand in both of hers and walked backwards, leading him.

"We should start now." She smiled. "Before you get too drunk."

Troy grinned, hoping he could hide his desire, at least until he got to her large hut.

As he walked with the striking woman with the straw white hair, twisted still with bones and flowers and metal talismans, he

remembered following an ancient legend and coming to this place just under four years ago.

He had found it wonderful, terrifying, brutal, and deadly. But given what had happened to the world outside, he now found it something else entirely.

He found it a home.

And a sanctuary.

Maybe one day in generations to come, the Vikings may travel back to the world outside and repopulate it. They had the dragon spears, and the robustness, so they might just make it.

And perhaps one of his offspring will be among them.

EPILOGUE

Year 3200 – what was once Norway.

The largest Viking clan, the Fjall, had left Lemuria for the forbidden world over four hundred years ago.

The great Troyson Strom had taught them the art of shipbuilding, and sailing. And he had even shown them where the magnetic green stone could be found so they could shape it into an all-seeing-eye, that they placed in the eye socket of their *drekkahofud* longboats.

What the first arrivers had found was a pristine land nearly devoid of animal life. The drekka plague was over, and as with the last mass extinction, the great beasts had decimated all the humans and animals, and then turned to cannibalizing their own kind.

The Vikings found a few rare drekka living in caves, but war parties led by warriors carrying a drekka-poison spearhead would always come back with their heads.

After several hundred years, the drekka were no more and slipped back into obscurity, first, and then into myth. And then in centuries more the Vikings, after being away from Lemuria so long, had begun to shrink back to their normal-size human stature. In more time still, even the tales of giants entered the lexicon of legends.

In their stories they still spoke of the great Queen Yrsa and her mighty war counsellor, who had defeated the killer morwi, and then drove the drekka back using the magical sword of Odin.

It was said, on the shores of the mysterious island of Lemuria an enormous stone statue of the pair had been erected. And it still stands there today.

The Vikings had spread across the land, and then across the seas to other lands. They had forgotten many things over the centuries, one of them being how to return to the lands of Lemuria.

Some said it existed behind a mighty wall of ice and hidden in a sea of fog so thick you could almost cut it with a blade. If you made it through, only then could you enter Odin's Gate that would lead you to the island that held the red, beating heart of the All Father himself.

Some said it was all true. But there were many more that doubted it ever existed.

The original *drekkahofud* longboats had long since turned to dust. But Hedda, the oldest member of the clan, and said to be the last descendent of Troyson and Yrsa, had a stone, like green fire, and flecked with something metallic inside.

She said it came from the last *drekkahofud* and she had spent years further smoothing and rounding it. And she said it would always point to the island, Lemuria, and find its way there through the thickest fog banks.

She promised that one day, maybe one day soon, someone would follow its stony gaze home, to the mysterious island of Lemuria. The land of the last great dragon, and the beating heart of a god.

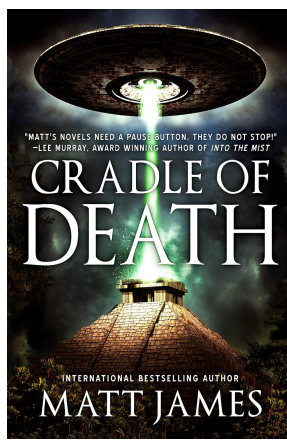
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PROLOGUE

Giza, Egypt
2559 B.C.

Building Khufu's pyramid was no small task. Luckily for Zadmarr, the king's Grand Architect, he was given the power of the gods. He didn't quite understand what the object was, but he did know how to wield its might. Still, even with the added strength, it had taken him fourteen long years to get to this point. Now, all he had to do was raise the precious capstone, and his work would finally be complete.

It was going to be Zadmarr's greatest challenge, but also his greatest accomplishment. He felt the strain on his soul. His very essence was being drained, stripped away into the cosmos. Being the empire's architect was an honorable position to hold. Unfortunately, for Zadmarr, and those that came before him—and after him—it was also a death sentence.

The sun scorched his exposed skin, yet Zadmarr felt cold. His skin was paler than usual too. He knew his lifeforce was nearly gone, but he still had a job to do, a calling to fulfill.

With the 'Will of the Gods,' I will complete what I started.

Zadmarr knew more about the gods than most. The pharaoh had given him insight into who they were. Though, he knew he hadn't been told everything. Unknown to most, a collection of archaic texts was handed down from king to king. They explained, to an extent, who had provided Egypt's great dynasty with the Will of the Gods. Holding the object up, Zadmarr was lost in its electric green glow.

Within the cube-shaped artifact was a strobing, swirling viscous liquid. It crackled with the energy of a thousand lightning strikes and softly vibrated in Zadmarr's hands. Only he, his apprentice, and the pharaoh could feel it. It proved that they, like their king, were of an ancient, royal bloodline. There were more like them too, but they wanted the Will of the Gods for more nefarious purposes.

Gratefully, Khufu ordered that sect to be put to death for fear of losing his prize, a prize that was to be buried with him in his pyramidal tomb. Zadmarr didn't agree with his king's decision to break tradition and steal away the object back to heaven. He believed that it should be passed on to the next pharaoh to be used to construct a better, vaster empire...as well as a deterrent against the kingdom's enemies.

And they had many.

But Khufu felt differently. Time had worn him down. He was perpetually sad, speaking of atrocities in his sleep, horrors that he said that he was responsible for. Zadmarr didn't know of anything in his king's past that was that atrocious. As far as

he knew, Khufu had been an honorable leader.

What's he hiding? Zadmarr asked himself. *Stop it!* he scolded. *You still have a duty to your king.*

Cradling the Will of the Gods in the crook of his left arm, Zadmarr closed his eyes, pulled it into his chest, and held out his right hand, palm down. He tapped into the artifact's power and felt an invisible force tug on his stomach. Slowly, he turned his hand over and raised his open hand to the sky. From beside the base of Khufu's pyramid, the enormous, beautiful capstone, and the strange mechanism hidden within it, rose.

The mechanism had been found with the Will of the Gods. The artifact had been locked into place and could only be moved when the current pharaoh grasped it.

There was more to the Will of the Gods than power. Within the object was a living source of energy. At least, that's what they believed. No one quite understood the artifact, not entirely, anyway. Legend says that it was discovered by accident by Khufu's predecessor's army, Sneferu. He slowly realized what he found in the caves beneath the future pyramid grounds. He had accomplished it through intense prayer and experimentation.

He begged the gods to give him the ability to remove the object. Eventually, Sneferu's prayers were answered, but in the form of Khufu.

The Will of the Gods and mechanism weren't the only thing they had found down there. The cavern was the single largest, enclosed space anyone had ever seen. Within it was something no one could adequately describe. No one within the kingdom had ever laid eyes on such a...vessel. They were so engrossed with it that they had attempted to recreate it. They called them "solar barges," and they were used for ceremonial purposes, to ferry the deceased to the sun god, Ra, in the afterlife. Zadmarr wondered what else the gods used the impossibly large vessel for.

And what else could the Will of the Gods be? Zadmarr asked himself, gripping the relic tight.

He was in control of it, but he was also in agony. His steadfast beliefs and determination let him push through it, however. Refocusing, he lifted his outstretched hand higher and higher. With each passing heartbeat, Zadmarr felt his life slip away. He knew he was going to die, and it didn't bother him in the least. He would perish for a noble cause. Not only was he about to complete his king's tomb, but he was also finishing construction on the Will of the Gods' final resting place.

Khufu's army had dug up the artifact's dock based on a location proven by the king himself and transferred it to Giza. Khufu refused to say how he knew where to find it. There was no evidence of it anywhere in their collection of texts. Then, Zadmarr and a team of the best and brightest went about designing and constructing the exquisite capstone covering.

Just...a little...higher.

Zadmarr's vision blurred and his head swam. He collapsed, but not before lowering the capstone into place. Folding in on himself, he handed over the Will of the Gods to his protégé and breathed his final breath. Hopefully, Mankesh would do as he'd been trained to do. If he didn't, the world would feel his failure.

Within that final exhalation, Zadmarr prayed to Ra above to protect his apprentice and guide him in his journey. He was now the empire's Grand Architect.

Mankesh stood, cradling the Will of the Gods like a newborn child. His eyes were wide, filled with wonder and anticipation. He knew he could do more with the artifact than his master ever could. Mankesh was bigger, faster, and stronger. He had a warrior's heart. Not only would he fulfill his destiny as the next Grand Architect, but he would also help usher in the next great army of the world...even if the pharaoh were unaware.

The thought of a group of devout followers, his prophets, infiltrating the kingdom

made him smile. On its face, he'd do everything that was asked of him. But behind closed doors, in the cover of night, Mankesh had plans to change the world as they knew it. He'd dug deep and found a beautiful truth about the gods.

He didn't know how, but as the new Grand Architect, he would bring the gods home even if it meant sacrificing the population of half the known world to do so. Genocide was a small price to pay to bask in his master's light.

Mankesh looked up to the heavens and closed his eyes and visualized the lands of Egypt being turned into a raging inferno.

Let it be done.

Qumran National Park, West Bank

Modern Day

Shoving his assistant deeper into the cave, Elliot Oxley retook his position just inside its entrance, gripping the only weapon he had in one of his gloved hands. Under normal circumstances, a tactical knife wouldn't do much good against the four extremists wielding AK-47 assault rifles.

Unless you were a man of Elliot's *talents*, that is.

Some forty feet in the air, Elliot had a perfect view of the landscape below. The low-roofed cave, like a handful of the other Dead Sea Caves, was situated halfway up a steep rock face. The only way inside was with climbing gear. In his mind's eye, Elliot imagined the last people to step foot inside the natural opening, some 2,500 years ago. They would've been forced to rappel down the peak of the rock formation with nothing more than a crudely fashioned rope and a handful of men holding the daring adventurer aloft.

No thanks, he thought, spying on the commotion below.

Beneath his perch was a long, bowl-like valley of stone and sand that stretched and wound on for miles. Elliot was kneeling atop one of the valley's highest, northernmost points. If he left his post, there'd be no way of escaping the twisting bathtub of a labyrinth without first running into the men with the guns. Unless he retreated to the cave, he'd be stuck in an oversized, overheating desert ditch with a small army of radical assholes.

Decisions, decisions...

But there was no decision to make now, because Elliot had already made up his mind. And even after having removed himself from the combat world over a decade earlier, he was trained to engage the enemy, regardless of any circumstances. The present situation was no different.

"Get back and keep quiet," he whispered, speaking to the only other person with him.

Still surveying the newly christened battlefield, Elliot quickly took stock of everything it offered in the way of cover. Unfortunately, there wasn't much besides the naturally formed offshoots, random boulders, and rises. Five people were already dead, including one of the five gunmen.

He knew about the unfolding chaos via radio when one of the park's security team had informed Elliot before he had been silenced. The dreadfully understaffed outfit, stationed at the edge of the excavation, had been completely overwhelmed in seconds.

Elliot's assistant, a Brit named Harry, was twenty-five years his junior. Typically, the younger man was full of piss and vinegar, eager to show Elliot and the others how awesome he was at life—a real pompous "college bro." Just thinking about it made Elliot's eyes roll. But even at twenty years of age, the forty-five-year-old archaeologist still ran circles around the entitled brat.

"You hear me?" Elliot asked, annoyed by his assistant's lack of response.

Borderline angry, he forcefully shoved his two-way radio into the *boy's* shaking arms, stirring him awake.

Harry snapped out of his stupor, and emphatically nodded his head. Tears streamed down his dust-covered face. The twin streaks reminded Elliot of Eric Draven, the *Crow*. The intern had none of Elliot's background, just the me-first attitude of someone who'd been coddled his entire young-adult life. The kid looked like he was going to pee down his leg, and honestly, Elliot wouldn't have blamed him if he did.

Taking a deep breath in the stale cave air, Elliot reeled back in disgust. It stunk of ammonia. Harry had already pissed himself.

Why me? he asked himself.

"What...are you...going to do?" Harry asked in between blubbers.

Elliot grumbled a series of incoherent curses to himself.

"What?" Harry asked, not hearing them.

The archaeologist quickly snapped up an open hand, hopefully silencing any other incoming queries. "It was nothing... Just stay here until I'm done, and," he shoved his walkie into Harry's chest, "radio in what you see."

The Brit's eyebrow raised. "Done with what?"

So much for not being questioned.

Elliot sighed. "What I was trained to do."

Sucking in another deep gulp of air, Elliot made his move.

Bolting out of the low, trapezoidal entrance, he clipped onto the braided rappelling line. He needed to get to ground level before he was spotted. Without wasting another second, he leapt out over the three-story drop, already planning out his next move. Unlike with Harry's frantic, emotional outburst, Elliot stayed calm. In times like this, the world around him slowed to a crawl.

Falling like a bomb, he reached his gloved left hand around his back and squeezed the line with just enough pressure to arrest his descent. His landing was hard—harder than he would've preferred. He was out of practice, after all. But he successfully turned the jarring impact into a graceful roll, finishing off the maneuver up onto one knee. Weapon up in a backhanded grip, he scanned the grounds before him and waited.

"Just like riding a bike." Elliot groaned as he stood. "A rusty bike..."

His *Volbeat* shirt was caked in dirt, and the seam across his left shoulder was torn. His worn blue jeans had survived the fall, looking as tattered as usual.

Instead of attempting to skirt around the shooters and head for the nearest encampment, as any sane person would do, Elliot went straight for the closest gunman. He was just under a hundred yards away from him, a distance he wasn't excited about. It'd be a miracle if he made it without being seen. Gliding heel-to-toe on the dry terrain, the only noise he made was the slightest of grinds and crunches.

The sun was on Elliot's back. Even if the gunman turned and spotted him, the sun's low, blinding rays would make Elliot all but invisible.

Happily, the killer never took that look behind him.

Lucky me.

A strong gust of wind buffeted Elliot's back, hiding his approach. He slowed and calmly strolled right up behind the assassin. The unidentifiable goon wore a beige hood and face covering. From the front, all you'd be able to see would be his forehead and eyes.

And they'd be as wide as saucers right about now, he thought.

Elliot had seen that "Oh, shit!" look many times back when he killed the retched refuse—like this guy—while on Uncle Sam's payroll.

Moving like a ghost, Elliot wrapped his free hand around the man's veiled mouth, instantly hearing a muffled yelp of surprise as he did. But it was too late. Before the

gunman knew what hit him, Elliot swiftly yanked the knife across the killer's throat, effortlessly slicing through the thin fabric between his jugular and the stainless-steel blade.

Knowing his target no longer had the ability with which to warn his comrades, Elliot shoved the wheezing man to the ground without a second glance. He picked up the felled Kalashnikov and immediately decided against using it. He depressed the magazine release and manually unloaded every bullet from within the banana-shaped cartridge.

Elliot could've simply used the rifle to mow down the remaining enemies, but stealth was vital in situations like this. He didn't want to draw the attention of this one's friends. Hostages were sure to be in custody. If the other assailants discovered what happened behind them, and decided to cut their losses and run, his co-workers' deaths would partially be his fault.

No, I can't let that happen, he thought, determined.

He was, at the moment, doing damage control. Blood had already been spilled. Plus, he always preferred his SOG knife over bullets in the past.

"Where are you?"

In reality, finding the other three gunmen wouldn't be hard. All he'd have to do was follow the gunshots and screams. These men weren't a squad of Delta operators. The men that opened fire on the excavation wanted pandemonium. Pandemonium led to newsworthy, global headlines. That's all assholes like this wanted. They wanted the world to know who they were and what they represented.

Pausing his counterassault, Elliot ducked behind a low rise of rocks in the center of the main path. Up on his tippy toes, he peeked over the formation. He confirmed that this was where the valley split up. He was at the base of the upside-down Y. The left arm, he knew, deadened after a series of sharp, switchbacking turns. The tributary on his right was the way to go. Like the other side, it cut back and forth. It also broke off into secondary branches, making it very easy to get lost.

But not for Elliot. He and his team had marked the trail, so Elliot knew where to go.

The frightful shouts of his coworkers, melding with the metallic report of two separate, yet similar, weapons echoed through the valley.

He'd been up against worse odds in his life. Though, he usually had something that packed a lot more punch than his SOG knife.

Hmm.

Elliot looked back and second-guessed not bringing along the dead man's rifle. He shook his head. No, he'd done the right thing.

More than most, Elliot understood the value of the element of surprise. It was generally the better option in any scenario.

Besides the racket an AK-47 made, it also had less-than-ideal accuracy, unless you were standing within spitting distance of the other guy. The reason that particular rifle was so prevalent in the world's militaries and private militias wasn't because of its reliance. It was because they were cheap and massively overproduced. If you knew where to look, and Elliot did, you could easily find one, as well as an excessive amount of spare ammunition.

"A suppressed M4 would be pretty nice right about now," Elliot muttered to himself. It was his old unit's weapon of choice and one he'd grown accustomed to using during their missions.

Moving fast, he slid to a stop and ducked down on one knee. He took a moment to catch his breath, then popped up like a meerkat, and observed the scene. He quickly found the cause of the commotion. Coming from around the bend ahead, Elliot watched as another of the *terrorists* backpedaled toward him, laying down cover fire for an injured ally.

And they were *definitely* terrorists.

If you shouted into the air and praised your god while slaughtering unarmed noncombatants, it made you one. It defined you as one in Elliot's book. He'd seen it a dozen-plus times before. Gladly, most of those animals lost their lives before they finished their worship. His prior crew was superb at what they did.

"Wish I had those guys right about now..."

He didn't need his entire team, though. All he'd need was one of them. Between Lincoln and him, they'd be able to wage a small war on whoever they deemed worthy of their combined wrath. They were the best, and no one ever argued the fact. They did, however, disagree with Elliot when he announced he was walking away from the military and retiring.

Of the two radicals, the wounded one was doubled over, holding his stomach, bleeding heavily. Elliot could tell that it was taking everything the other man had to leave his comrade to die. The commitment impressed Elliot. He could tell there was more to the relationship than just being brothers in arms. These two were friends.

Cute, he thought.

So, Elliot would take the decision out of the guy's hands.

Springing to his feet, Elliot flipped the knife into the air. After half of a rotation, he snagged its blade. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he launched it forward. As it silently whirled through the dry air towards the un-wounded terrorist, Elliot moved for the injured, but still very dangerous gunman. Meanwhile, the knife struck its target first, burying itself into the back of the upright man. He dropped just as Elliot dove atop the shooter with the stomach wound.

Upon contact with the prone man, the barrel of his gun swung around, and he opened fire. Elliot spun to avoid taking a bullet to the chest, and instead, the projectile grazed the edge of his left trapezoid. It hardly did any real damage. At most, it'd need a butterfly bandage—maybe a couple of stitches.

His momentum carried him forward, and he promptly disarmed and overpowered the wounded, hollering man, slamming him onto his chest with an audible "Oof!" Using his six-foot-four, 220-pound frame to his advantage, Elliot grabbed a handful of the man's greasy black hair and drove his face deep into the hot, stifling sand. Locking his elbow out, Elliot leaned into him, riding the feeble man as he bucked and flailed.

Suffocation was a horrible way to die.

And these assholes deserve it, he thought, snarling.

Keeping his left hand engaged, Elliot reached back toward the other gunman, the one that now had his SOG knife in his back. The extremist with the stomach wound, the person currently beneath him, was laying atop the only other nearby weapon, another AK-47. But the man's positioning made it all but impossible for Elliot to obtain it.

So, Elliot concentrated on reacquiring his knife instead.

His fingers grazed the bloodied hilt several times before eventually wrapping around it and swiftly plucking it free. The killer was roused by the sudden movement of the blade exiting his body and reacted by going straight for his rifle.

Gritting his teeth, Elliot drove his knife back into the same man, this time, aiming for his kidneys. After the second such strike, Elliot jammed the blade in as deep as it would go and twisted it back and forth until, with one final whimper, the assailant's breath caught, and his wild eyes went still.

Now, Elliot thought, looking around, *where's your gun?*

He looked around and saw that it was way out of reach. And, as it was, he was out in the open. Elliot knew he'd be a sitting duck if he didn't get moving soon. The guy he thought had suffocated was still alive beneath him too. He had to get to cover before—

Crunch.

Three things happened at once. Firstly, the gunman beneath him finally stopped struggling. Secondly, Elliot yanked his knife free of the other corpse's lower back with a sickening *slurp*. And thirdly, a pair of booted feet impacted the scorched earth behind him.

The last extremist arrived.

Elliot sighed, his shoulders dipping.

"Don't move!" the newcomer yelled in Arabic.

"What?" Elliot asked, pretending not to understand.

Unbeknownst to many, Elliot spoke the language fluently. He was as familiar with the Middle East as any American alive. He had spent a lot of time there in the past. He had hated every minute of the constant billowing sand and heat. It was a terrible combination, but he had been there for noble reasons, so he put up with it without complaint.

"Drop your weapon!"

"What?" he shouted back, cracking his voice like a teenage boy.

"Knife down!" the assassin ordered, switching to broken English. "Hands in air."

Still straddling the suffocated man, Elliot abided the killer's demands and let go of both the dead killer's grungy hair and his knife. Slowly, Elliot raised his hands and pretended to be frightened. "Please, I'm unarmed." He faked a sob. "I'm an archaeologist, not a soldier!"

Both were *technically* true. Elliot was, in fact, an unarmed archaeologist, but for seventeen years of his life, he was an active-duty soldier, enlisting directly out of high school. He rarely ever revealed what his job had been in the military. Even now, if someone asked, he'd just broadly say, "I was in the Navy." Again, he wasn't lying. He just wasn't telling the whole truth.

Once known as Chief Special Warfare Operator Elliot Mason Oxley, "Ox," as his teammates called him, was the leader of Red Squadron's Titans. They were an elite arm of the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG), also known as DEVGRU, as well as Task Force Blue. Around the world, they were more commonly referred to as SEAL Team Six.

"On feet!" the radical shouted.

Well, here we go.

Elliot nodded and put his hands down against the torched, grainy earth. As he pushed off, he dug his fingers deep into the compressed sand. Keeping up the charade of being scared, he spun and stumbled forward, closing the gap between himself and the lone gunman. Opening his eyes wide, he stared at the rifle and put his shaking hands—his closed fists—around the back of his head, hiding his twin fistfuls of sand.

The bearded gunman was close, only a few feet away.

While facing his would-be executioner, Elliot mentally walked through every situation possible, trying desperately to avoid getting shot point-blank. The sand would be a useful distraction, and with any luck, it would momentarily blind the bearded assassin after Elliot threw it. But if his plan didn't work, what then?

The fact that Elliot could see his face, plain as day, told him that this guy was the leader of the team, and more than likely, a wanted man. He was more than likely known throughout the region. His exposed face was intended to be used as a weapon. It would instill fear into those who recognized him.

Elliot didn't know the man. It didn't matter anyway. He wasn't intimidated by anyone based on who they were. The only time he felt unsettled about another human being was because of how big of a stick the other person carried.

Their proximity was another reason Elliot held out hope of surviving. All he had to do was toss the sand into the air, stay low, and bullrush the smaller man. But

could he avoid getting shot worse than the close shave he had sustained only minutes earlier?

Let's hope so, he thought, deciding he'd lead with his shoulder.

He'd been shot there once before. He even recalled the hell-fire in which it burned.

Elliot laughed every time a *hero* in some overproduced Hollywood movie got shot. The film industry didn't know dick about gunshot wounds and the debilitating result they had to the area surrounding the injury. But Elliot wasn't dumb. He recognized that moviemakers were meant to entertain, not resemble real life. If they made movies out of his past experiences with the SEALs, they wouldn't be marketed as action-adventure romps.

They'd be R-rated military-horror films.

The only reason you ever heard stories of men toughing it out and finishing the mission was because the alternative was always Death's noose. Pain was a blessing compared to that. So was the accompanying adrenaline rush. Epinephrine was a soldier's best friend.

It was pumping itself through Elliot's system at the moment.

A strong gust of hot, disgusting air snapped through the high rocks surrounding the site. As a result, Elliot's overgrown, rust-colored hair billowed, sticking to his sweat-soaked, lightly freckled face. He'd been meaning to get his locks cut but had been in the field for months, bouncing from country to country, job to job.

His employers, the higher-ups at the British Museum, loved his enthusiasm and his eagerness to do anything the profession required. Yes, from leading his own digs, as he did now, to assisting others with their efforts, Elliot had quickly built a reputation as the hardest working field man around.

He owed his work ethic to the lessons learned while serving his country—a country he didn't represent anymore. Elliot was in the process of becoming an English citizen. It only seemed fitting, and it would make the paperwork a hell of a lot easier on him. He lived in London, after all.

God save the Queen and what-have-you.

Sidestepping to his left, away from the body beneath him, Elliot feigned a fall and rolled, throwing the sand at the shooter's face. The buffeting wind took the payload and delivered it as Elliot hoped, right into the man's eyes. Rolling one more time to his left, Elliot was now "safely" out of the wailing man's sights. He jumped to his feet and charged him. With only feet until he impacted the terrorist's gut, his gun barrel swung Elliot's way.

For a split-second, Elliot's eyes went wide, and he waited to die.

Death never came, though. The trigger was never pulled.

He was too close, and his momentum was too great. Instead of being shot, he barreled into the blinded gunman with the force of a wrecking ball. Elliot had no knife, but that didn't mean he was entirely unarmed.

Both combatants went to the ground hard. In a brawl, Elliot was far from honorable. He didn't mind fighting dirty. The first thing he did was jam his right thumb into the bearded man's left eye, driving the gritty sand in deeper. Bullets shot wildly into the sunlit sky. The noise caused Elliot to flinch. The reports were deafening. His head was only inches from the gun barrel.

Twice did the muzzle sway back toward his face.

Elliot grabbed the radical's right hand, the one holding the rifle. Like the world's deadliest game of Thumb War, Elliot wrapped his thumb around the gunman's finger, and trigger, and squeezed as hard as he could. Together, they rapidly emptied the weapon's magazine harmlessly into the sky above. With that part of the threat neutralized, Elliot solely focused on his foe.

Elliot drove his right palm into the terrorist's left eye socket, purposely abusing

the same eye again. The blow was meant to concuss, possibly even incapacitate. It did the former. The local's hold loosened on the empty AK-47's handgrip, and Elliot quickly ripped it away, tossing it somewhere behind him.

Balling his fist, Elliot clubbed his adversary in the throat with a quick, cobra-like strike, landing the blow before it could be blocked. Gasping for air, the bearded man hid his face from Elliot's fury. One after the other, he beat the killer with his bare hands. He was so lost in his rage that he didn't hear the authorities shouting for him to stop. Only when he was thrown to the ground and cuffed did he understand what was happening.

He was being arrested for saving lives.

Elliot was detained for nearly eight hours due to his part in the explosive conflict, even after a number of his colleagues came rushing to his side, pleading his case. Still, the police refused to set him free. It didn't surprise him, either. Things operated differently in this part of the world.

In the West Bank, he was the outsider. If something like this happened back in the U.S., he would've been seen as a hero, not a troublemaker. Tensions were elevated all over the world, especially in a place like the West Bank. The Middle East was always centimeters away from boiling over and turning into an all-out war.

After being cuffed by two cops, Elliot was hauled to his feet, easily towering over the pair. Staying calm, he glanced over his shoulder and was happy to see that the last gunman was flat on his back, eyes closed.

At least the asshat is down for the count, Elliot thought.

"Stop!" Janet shouted, climbing out from beneath a nearby truck. "Don't! He saved us!"

Peter said the same thing—everyone that witnessed Elliot's daring counterstrike did. Last to arrive was Harry, and he still had Elliot's two-way radio in his hand. He'd done as Elliot asked and called out what he'd seen from high above.

A third local, not a cop, stepped up. Elliot recognized him. Elijah worked as a ranger in the Qumran National Park, and he took his job very seriously. Elliot respected that. Elijah was the one park officials sent out to investigate any, and all, disturbances occurring within the park.

Elliot had witnessed two other disruptions since stepping foot in West Bank, though, neither were like this. The first time was a theft, and the other incident involved a person having some fun with some spray paint.

He's probably the one who called it in, Elliot thought, nodding to the man.

"More trouble, Mr. Oxley?" Elijah asked in perfect English.

Elliot shrugged. "You know me. One thing leads to another, and—"

The injured terrorist leapt to his feet and cried out to the heavens. Brandishing a wickedly curved blade, he raised it and targeted the person nearest to him, Elijah, the park ranger. The attacker had only been playing possum, feigning his unconsciousness.

With his hands bound behind his back, Elliot was still able to yank free of the startled policemen. In one fluid motion, he spun and landed a strong back kick to the killer's wrist. Lunging forward, he then smashed his forehead into the terrorist's swollen face, dazing him and causing him to drop the blade. Elliot's assault was halted by the echoing reverberation of a gunshot.

The last of the radicals was down again. This time, it was for good. One of the cops had finally reacted and drew his pistol.

Elijah's stunned expression flicked back and forth between the body and Elliot half a dozen times before finally settling on the American. Like Elliot had done before, the park ranger gave him his own nod.

"Thank you, my friend," he said, still flabbergasted.

Elliot shrugged. "All in a day's work."

Cradle of Death is available from Amazon [here!](#)

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